Kino no Tabi Volume6

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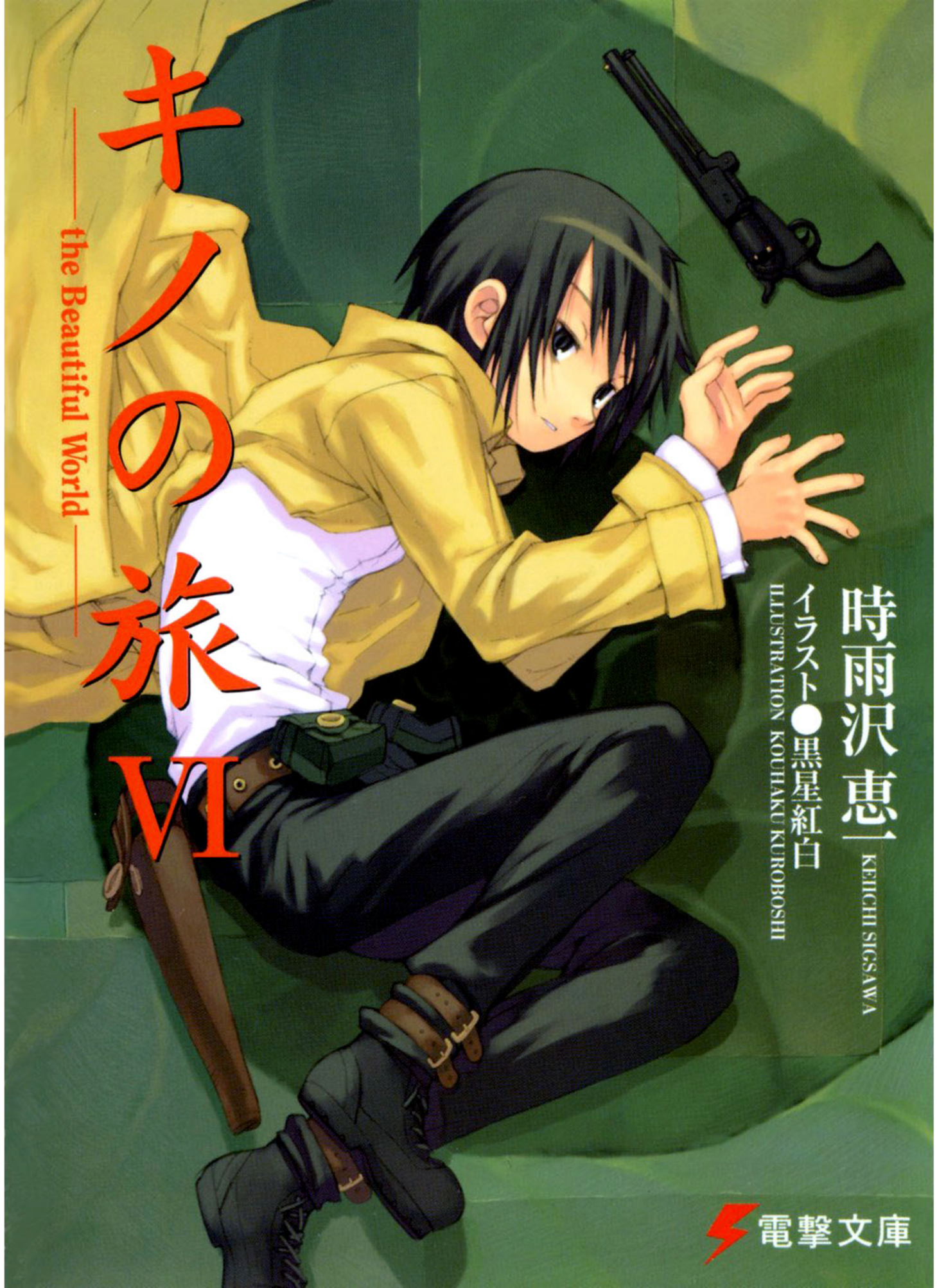
These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 6

キノの旅Ⅵ

the Beautiful World

よくない道だねえ、と走ってきたモトラド（注・二輪車。空を飛ばないものだけを指す）が言った。後輪の脇には箱が、上には大きな鞄と丸めた寝袋とコート。旅荷物をたくさん積んだモトラドだった。でもやっぱりこれは近道だよと、モトラドの運転手が言った。黒いジャケットを着て、帽子とゴーグルをした十代中頃の若い人間だった。腰を太いベルトで締めたジャケットの前合わせは、初夏の風が入るように大きく開けていた。その下に、白いシャツを着ていた。

人間キノと言葉を話す二輪車エルメスの旅の話。短編連作の形で綴られる、大人気新感覚ノベル第６弾!!



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（メ切直前の筆者）

時雨沢恵一（しぐさわけいいち）

8月10日——鎌倉花火大会の日。子供の頃。今は亡きおばあちゃんの長谷の別荘へ行って、美しい花火を見ました。あれから幾年月。“メ切”という“8月31日”に脅えながら、年中夏休みのような専業作家人生を歩む、まだあの時の子供のような時雨沢です。

【電撃文庫作品】

キノの旅　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅱ　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅲ　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅳ　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅴ　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅵ　the Beautiful World

アリソン

イラスト：黒星紅白（くろぼしこうはく）

1974年生まれ。性別：男。九州在住。プレイステーションソフト「サモンナイト」のキャラクターデザインを手がける。フリーでも色々やっています。趣味：プラモデル買い、釣り。

カバー/旭印刷

キノの旅

—the Beautiful World—

VI

時雨沢恵一 KEIICHI SIGSAWA
イラスト●黒星紅白
ILLUSTRATION KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

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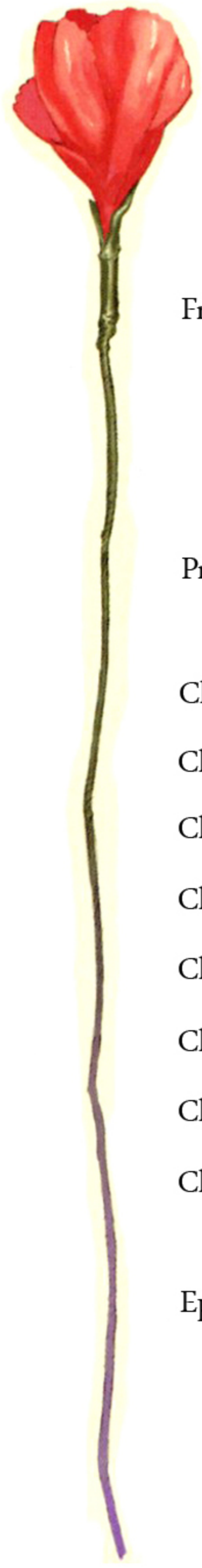

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「入れない国」
—Reasonable—

春の日のことです。
ある国の城門を、旅人が叩きました。
旅人は若い人間で、茶色のコートを羽織り、その下には黒いジャケット。短い黒髪に、鍔のある帽子とゴーグル。腰にはハンド・パースエイダー（注・パースエイダーは銃器です。この場合は拳銃です）をホルスターに吊っています。
モトラド（注・二輪車です。空を飛ばないものだけを指します）に乗って、ここまでやって来ました。
「入国させてください」
旅人が言いました。すると、門番の兵隊は目を吊り上げて言いました。
「だめです！　あなたのような人間の入国は、一切認められません！　今すぐ立ち去ってください！」
旅人は訳を訊ねました。すると門番は、
「あなたがパースエイダーなんか持っているからですよ！　以前この国に入ったパースエイダー持ちが、とんでもない事件を起こしました。これ以上ないほど、とんでもない事件です。それ以来、この国にパースエイダーを持って入国しようとする人は、城門で追い返すことにしています。さあ、理由を聞いたんだからとっとと立ち去ってください」
旅人が聞きます。
「パースエイダーを城門にあずけての入国もできないんですか？」
門番は怒って、
「だめに決まっているでしょう！　パースエイダーなんて持っている頭のおかしい人間は、たとえそれを捨てたとしてもだめです！」
旅人は残念そうに、入国を諦めました。
モトラドで、去っていきました。

秋の日のことです。
ある国の城門を、旅人が叩きました。
旅人は若い人間で、腰を太いベルトで締めた黒いジャケット。短い黒髪に、鍔のある帽子とゴーグル。腰にはハンド・パースエイダーをホルスターに吊っています。
モトラドに乗って、ここまでやって来ました。
「入国させてください」
旅人が言いました。すると、門番の兵隊は目を吊り上げて言いました。
「だめです！　あなたのような人間の入国は、一切認められません！　今すぐ立ち去ってください！」
旅人は訳を訊ねました。すると門番は、
「あなたがモトラドなんか乗っているからですよ！　以前この国に入ったモトラド乗りが、とんでもない事件を起こしました。これ以上ないほど、とんでもない事件です。それ以来、この国にモトラドに乗って入国しようとする人は、城門で追い返すことにしています。さあ、理由を聞いたんだからとっとと立ち去ってください！」
旅人が聞きます。
「モトラドのエンジンをかけないことにしての入国もできないんですか？」
門番は怒って、
「だめに決まっているでしょう！　モトラドなんて乗っている頭のおかしい人間は、たとえそれを捨てたとしてもだめです！」
旅人は残念そうに、入国を諦めました。
モトラドで、去っていきました。

夏の日のことです。
ある国の城門を、旅人が叩きました。
旅人は若い人間で、黒いジャケットの袖を取ったベスト、その下に白いシャツ。短い黒髪に、鍔のある帽子とゴーグル。腰にはハンド・パースエイダーをホルスターに吊っています。
モトラドに乗って、ここまでやって来ました。
「入国させてください」
旅人が言いました。すると、門番の兵隊は目を吊り上げて言いました。
「だめです！　あなたのような人間の入国は、一切認められません！　今すぐ立ち去ってください！」
旅人は訳を訊ねました。すると門番は、
「あなたがモトラドなんか乗っているからですよ！　以前この国に入ったモトラド乗りが、とんでもない事件を起こしました。これ以上ないほど、とんでもない事件です。それ以来、この国にモトラドに乗って入国しようとする人は、城門で追い返すことにしています。さあ、理由を聞いたんだからとっとと立ち去ってください！」
旅人が聞きます。
「モトラドのエンジンをかけないことにしての入国もできないんですか？」
門番は怒って、
「だめに決まっているでしょう！　モトラドなんて乗っている頭のおかしい人間は、たとえそれを捨てたとしてもだめです！」
旅人は残念そうに、入国を諦めました。
モトラドで、去っていきました。

冬の日のことです。
ある国の城門を、旅人が叩きました。
旅人は若い人間で、厚手の防寒着の下に黒いジャケット。短い黒髪に、毛皮のついた防寒帽と一眼式ゴーグル。おなかの位置にハンド・パースエイダーをホルスターに吊っています。
モトラドに乗って、ここまでやって来ました。
「入国させてください」
旅人が言いました。すると、門番の兵隊は目を吊り上げて言いました。
「だめです！　あなたのような人間の入国は、一切認められません！　今すぐ立ち去ってください！」
旅人は訳を訊ねました。すると門番は、
「あなたがパースエイダーを持っていて、モトラドなんか乗っていて、黒いジャケットを着ているからですよ！　以前この国に入ったパースエイダー持ちでモトラド乗りで黒いジャケットを着た人が、とんでもない事件を起こしました。これ以上ないほど、とんでもない事件です。それ以来、この国にパースエイダーを持ってモトラドに乗って黒いジャケットを着て入国しようとする人は、城門で追い返すことにしています。さあ、理由を聞いたんだからとっとと立ち去ってください！」
旅人が聞きます。
「パースエイダーを城門に預けて、モトラドのエンジンをかけないことにして、黒いジャケットを脱いでの入国もできないんですか？」
門番は怒って、
「だめに決まっているでしょう！　パースエイダーなんて持っていてモトラドなんて乗っている頭のおかしい人間は、たとえそれらを捨てたとしてもだめです！」
「それは残念です。森でしとめた珍しい動物の毛皮が結構たくさんあるんですが、この国での売却はできませんね」
旅人は残念そうに、入国を諦めようとしました。
振り返った旅人を門番が引き留めて、
「しかしながらよく考えると、パースエイダーは危険な旅には必要ですし、モトラドも小回りが利いて便利な乗り物です。黒いジャケットも、シックでいいですね。お似合いですよ。こんな寒い時期にせっかくいらした旅人さんを追い返すのは酷な気がします。どうぞお入りください」
「そうですか？　それでは遠慮なく」
旅人は、国の中に入りました。

「中立な話」
—All Alone—

あるところでの話です。
一人の旅人が、行き倒れになって死んでいました。その人の持ち物の中で、価値のある物がいくつかありました。
そこへ、たまたま通りかかった旅人が二人いました。二人は、金目の物は自分がもらうと、お互いに言い張って譲りませんでした。
一人の旅人が、諍いの最中に通りかかりました。まさに殺し合おうとしている二人の中に入って、何が起きているのか訊ねました。
二人は状況を説明した後、
「貴方は一体どちらの立場に立つ？」
やって来た一人に聞きました。
「私は、どちらの立場にも立ちません。中立です」
一人は言いました。
すると二人は、
「そうか」「そうか」
その一人に撃ち殺された二人分の金目の物を仲良く分けました。
あるところでの話です。
一人の旅人が、行き倒れになって死んでいました。その人の持ち物の中で、価値のある物がいくつかありました。
そこへ、たまたま通りかかった旅人が二人いました。二人は、金目の物は自分がもらうと、お互いに言い張って譲りませんでした。中立です」
一人のシズが、腰を連れて、諍いの最中に通りかかりました。まさに殺し合おうとしている二人の中に入って、何が起きているのか訊ねました。
二人は状況を説明した後、
「貴方は一体どちらの立場に立つ？」
やって来たシズに聞きました。
「私は、どちらの立場にも立ちません。中立です」
シズは言いました。
すると二人は、
「そうか」「そうか」
そのシズを撃ち殺そうとして、シズは平然としている二人に、弾丸を弾きました。
「とりあえず、仲良く二人で分けてください。さもなければ二人とも斬ります」
シズが言いました。
あるところでの話です。
一人の旅人が、行き倒れになって死んでいました。その人の持ち物の中で、価値のある物がいくつかありました。
そこへ、たまたま通りかかった旅人が二人いました。二人は、金目の物は自分がもらうと、お互いに言い張って譲りませんでした。
一人のキノが、エルメスに乗って、諍いの最中に通りかかりました。まさに殺し合おうとしている二人の間に立って、何が起きているのか訊ねました。
二人は状況を説明した後、
「あなたは一体どちらの立場に立つ？」
やって来たキノに聞きました。
「ボクは、興味ありません。お二人で決めてください」
キノは言いました。そしてあっという間に、エルメスで走り去って、そこからいなくなりました。
あるところでの話です。
一人の旅人が、行き倒れになって死んでいました。その人の持ち物の中で、価値の

ある物がいくつかありました。
そこへ、たまたま通りかかった旅人が二人いました。二人は、金目の物は自分がもらうと、お互いに言い張って譲りませんでした。
一人の師匠が、相棒のハンサムで少し背の低い男を連れて、諍いの最中に通りかかりました。まさに殺し合おうとしている二人の中に入って、何が起きているのか訊ねました。
二人は状況を説明した後、
「貴女は一体どちらの立場に立つ？」
やって来た師匠に聞きました。
「とりあえず、三人分頂きます」
師匠と男は、二人にパースエイダーを向けて言いました。

「戦車の話」
—Life Goes On.—

キノと名乗る旅人がいました。
キノはとっても若い人間でしたけれど、だいたい誰にも負けないパースエイダー（注・銃器のことです）の名手でした。
キノの旅の相棒は、モトラド（注・二輪車です。空を飛ばないものだけを指します）のエルメスです。後部座席は荷台になっていて、荷物をたくさん積み込んで、キノはそれは旅人なんですから、いろいろな国を見て回っています。

ある時、キノとエルメス

が森で休んでいたお昼時です。
あまり光も通さない鬱蒼とした森の中に、突然木々を押し倒すすごい音が聞こえてきました。鳥達が騒ぎながら飛び上がっていきます。
「なんだ？」
キノが驚きました。座っていた倒木から腰を上げました。
「あ、戦車だね。キノ」
細い道に止まっているエルメスが言いました。木々をなぎ倒す音はますます大きくなって、揺れまで伝わってきました。
そして、一台の浮遊戦車がやってきました。

森の中に自分と同じ幅の道を作りながら、キノとエルメスの目の前に現れました。最後の木が、めきめきばきばきずーん、と倒れて、戦車は止まりました。キノの背と同じくらいの高さに浮遊していました。大きな車体や装甲で囲まれた旋回砲塔の上に、折れた枝や草が載っていました。
「やあ。モトラドさん。そして、その運転手さん」
戦車が言いました。
「今日は、戦車さん。リフターの調子はどう？」
エルメスが聞いて、
「うん、悪くないよ。最近は高く飛ばないようにしているから」
戦車が答えました。そして訊ねてきます。
「あなた達は、何をしているの？」
「ボク達は、旅をしています。——あなたは？」
キノが巨体を見上げながら聞いて、戦車は、いい質問だねと言った後答えます。
「戦車を探しているんだ」
「戦車を、ですか？」
「そう」
「捜して、見つけて、どうするの？」

エルメスが聞きました。
「もちろん。撃破するんだ」
キノがちらっとエルメスを見て、
「撃破？　主砲で撃ち壊すと言うことですか？」
「そう。一番強力な武器がこれだからね。二百ミリ滑腔砲さ」
キノの質問に、戦車が前に突き出している二本の砲身を揺らしながら答えました。それは長い筒で、途中ちょっとだけ太いところがあります。先端から根本まで白い細い線がいくつも巻いて描かれてあって、まるで縞馬のようになっていました。
「で、どうして？」

「それが命令だからなんだ」
「命令、ですか？」
「そう」
戦車が砲身を上下しました。エルメスが訊ねます。
「誰のさ？」
「戦車長殿の。以前乗っていた、唯一の人間なんだ」
「以前？　今はどうしちゃったの？」
「前は、ちゃんと席に座って、いろいろな命令を出したり、整備をしたりしてくれていたよ。たくさんの敵をやっつけた。砲身の撃破マークを見てよ。本当はもっとたくさん撃破したんだけれど、もう線が描ききれなくなっちゃって。すごいでしょう？　——でも、半年前の戦闘で、戦車長殿は死んじゃった。ちょっとだけ開いていたハッチから流れ弾が飛び込んで、中で跳ね回っちゃったんだ。少し苦しんで死んじゃって、やがて肉が腐って、今は洋服とヘルメットと、白い骨だけしか残っていない。見る？」
「いいえ、結構です」
キノが丁寧に断りました。
「そして、命令とは？」
「うん。戦車長殿がね、死ぬ間際に命令したんだ。戦車を破壊しろって。色が黒くて、砲塔の右脇に三本の紅い縦線があって、左側に獏の絵が描いてある戦車。それを絶対に確実にしっかりと破壊しろよって命令を受けて、ずっと探しているところなんだよ。昼でも夜でも雨でも霧でも相手が見える、とても優秀な光学センサーを装備しているのに、それなのにいつまで経っても見つからないんだ。戦場で見つからなくて、今こうしてあちらこちらを捜しているところさ。ねえ旅人さん、知らないかな？　そんな戦車、今までに見なかったかな？」
「いいえ」
キノが首を振って答えました。
「そっか……。でも、これからも探し続けるよ。絶対に見つけてみせる。絶対に。——それこそがやるべきことなんだから。なすべきことなんだから」
戦車の言葉は、まるで自分自身に言い聞かすようでした。

「そうですか……。ボク達は、もう少しここで休んでから出発します」
キノが言って、
「そう。じゃあ、もう行くよ。あちらこちらを捜さなくっちゃ。さよなら。モトラドさんと旅人さん」
戦車は再び進み始めました。浮かびながら、そして前にある木を再び遠慮なくなぎ倒しながら、前へ前へと進んでいきます。真っ直ぐ進んでいきます。何処までも真っ直ぐ進んでいきます。
「……」
浮遊戦車の後ろ姿を、キノが眺めていました。
脇から、エルメスが聞きます。
「あれのこと、だよね」
「ああ。でも――」
キノが、戦車の後ろ姿を眺めていました。色が黒くて、砲塔の右脇に三本の紅い縦線があって、左側に獏の絵が描いてある戦車の後ろ姿を、見えなくなるまで眺めていました。

If I can't swear, I'll swear

If I don't swear, I can swear

If I can't swear, I can swear

— I don't trust me. —

Frontispiece: "A Land of No Admittance" —Reasonable—

Frontispiece

"A Land of No Admittance"

— Reasonable —

One spring day.

A traveler knocked at the gates of a certain country.

The traveler was a young person, wearing a brown coat over a black jacket. She has short black hair, and was wearing a brimmed hat and goggles. A hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) holster was suspended from her waist.

She came here riding a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly).

"Please let us enter," the traveler said.

Then, the gatekeeper narrowed his eyes and spoke.

"No! We cannot allow people like you to enter the country! Please leave right away!"

The traveler asked for the reason, and the gatekeeper responded,

"It's because you have a persuader with you! All persuader-holders who came to this country before caused terrible incidents. We've had enough of these

incidents. Since then, all persuader-holders who sought to enter this country were asked to turn back. Now that you've heard the reason, please hurry up and leave."

The traveler asked, "Can't I just leave my persuader in custody at the gates so I can enter?"

The gatekeeper became angry, "Don't you get it?! People using things like persuaders are not right in the head, so it doesn't matter whether they discard their persuaders or not!"

The traveler looked rueful, and gave up on entering the country. She went away on her motorrad.

—

One summer day.

A traveler knocked at the gates of a certain country.

The traveler was a young person, wearing a black vest which was converted from a jacket by removing the

sleeves, and a white shirt underneath. She had short, black hair, and was wearing a brimmed hat and goggles. A hand persuader holster was suspended from her waist.

She came here riding a motorrad.

"Please let us enter," the traveler said.

Then, the gatekeeper narrowed his eyes and spoke.

"No! We cannot allow people like you to enter the country! Please leave right away!"

The traveler asked for the reason, and the gatekeeper responded,

"It's because you are riding a motorrad! All motorrad riders who came to this country before caused terrible incidents. We've had enough of these incidents. Since then, all motorrad riders who sought to enter this country were asked to turn back. Now that you've heard the reason, please hurry up and leave."

The traveler asked, "Can't I just promise not to start the motorrad's engine so I can enter?"

The gatekeeper became angry, "Don't you get it! People riding something like a motorrad are not right in the head, so it doesn't matter whether they discard their motorrads or not!"

The traveler looked rueful, and gave up on entering the country. She went away on her motorrad.

—

One autumn day.

A traveler knocked at the gates of a certain country.

The traveler was a young person, wearing a black jacket with a wide belt fastened around the waist. She had short, black hair, and was wearing a brimmed hat and goggles. A hand persuader holster was suspended from her waist.

She came here riding a motorrad.

"Please let us enter," the traveler said.

Then, the gatekeeper narrowed his eyes and spoke.

"No! We cannot allow people like you to enter the country! Please leave right away!"

The traveler asked for the reason, and the gatekeeper responded,

"It's because you are wearing a black jacket! All persons wearing black jackets who came to this country before caused terrible incidents. We've had enough of these incidents. Since then, all people wearing black jackets who sought to enter this country were asked to turn back. Now that you've heard the reason, please hurry up and leave."

The traveler asked, "Can't I just take off my jacket so I can enter?"

The gatekeeper became angry, "Don't you get it! People wearing black jackets are not right in the head, so it doesn't matter whether they discard their jackets or not !"

The traveler looked rueful, and gave up on entering the country. She went away on her motorrad.

—

One winter day.

A traveler knocked at the gates of a certain country.

The traveler was a young person, wearing a black jacket underneath a thick snowsuit. She had short, black hair, and was wearing a furry winter cap and single-lens goggles. A hand persuader holster was suspended in front of her stomach.

She came here riding a motorrad.

"Please let us enter," the traveler said.

Then, the gatekeeper narrowed his eyes and spoke.

"No! We cannot allow people like you to enter the country! Please leave right away!"

The traveler asked for the reason, and the gatekeeper responded,

"It's because you have a persuader, ride a motorrad, and wear a black jacket! All people who had persuaders, riding motorrads, and wearing black jackets who came to this country before caused terrible incidents. We've had enough of these incidents. Since then, all people who have persuaders, riding motorrads, and wearing black jackets who sought to enter this country were asked to turn back. Now that you've heard the reason, please hurry up and leave."

The traveler asked, "Can't I just leave my persuader in custody, promise not to start the motorrad's engine, and take off my jacket so I can enter?"

The gatekeeper became angry, "Don't you get it! People who have persuaders, ride motorrads, and wear black jackets are not right in the head, so it doesn't matter whether they discard them all or not!"

"That's a pity. I got heaps of rare fur from the animals I shot down in the forest, but it seems that I can't sell them in this country."

The traveler looked rueful, and gave up on entering the country.

The gatekeeper restrained the traveler who was about to turn back.

"But after thinking it through, we realized that a persuader is necessary in such a dangerous journey; a motorrad's maneuverability makes it a convenient and nifty vehicle; and a black jacket is fashionable — it looks great on you. It would be harsh if we send away a precious traveler in such cold weather. Please go ahead and enter."

"Is that so? Then I wouldn't hesitate."

The traveler entered the country.

Frontispiece: "An Unbiased Tale" —All Alone—[1]

Frontispiece

“An Unbiased Tale”

— All Alone —

Some day, somewhere,

A traveler had died by the road. Within his bags were several valuable items.

Two travelers had come upon the scene and decided to keep the loot for themselves, but neither of the two would yield the treasure to the other.

As the two men [2] argued, another traveler came upon the scene. The traveler broke up the two men who were on the verge of killing each other and asked them of the situation.

Both men explained the situation to the latecomer and asked,

“Who would you side with?”

“I will remain neutral and not side with either of you,” answered the third traveler.

“Is that so?” “Really?” the two men replied.

Both men pointed their persuaders at the latecomer and pulled the trigger, then happily divided the loot evenly among themselves.

—

Some day, somewhere,

A traveler had died by the road. Within his bags were several valuable items.

Two travelers had come upon the scene and decided to keep the loot for themselves, but neither of the two would yield the treasure to the other.

As the two men argued, Shizu, accompanied by Riku, came upon the scene. Shizu broke up the two men who were on the verge of killing each other and asked them of the situation.

Both men explain the situation to Shizu and asked,

“Who would you side with?”

“I will remain neutral and not side with either of you,” answered Shizu.

“Is that so?” “Really?” the two men replied.

Both men pointed their persuaders at the latecomer and pulled the trigger, but the blade from Shizu's sword had deflected the bullets.

Shizu said to the dumbfounded travelers,

“Please divide the valuables evenly among yourselves, or else I will be forced to kill the both of you.”

—

Some day, somewhere,

A traveler had died by the road. Within his bags were several valuable items.

Two travelers had come upon the scene and decided to keep the loot for themselves, but neither of the two would yield the treasure to the other.

As the two men argued, Kino, who was aboard Hermes, came upon the scene. Kino broke up the two men who were on the verge of killing each other and asked them of the situation.

Both men explained the situation to Kino and asked,

“Who would you side with?”

“I have no interest in your affair, you settle that on your own,” answered Kino. And in a blink of an eye, Kino ran away with Hermes and disappeared from that place.

—

Some day, somewhere,

A traveler had died by the road. Within his bags were several valuable items.

Two travelers had come upon the scene and decided to keep the loot for themselves, but neither of the two would yield the treasure to the other.

As the two men argued, Master, with her partner, a slightly short but handsome man came upon the scene. She broke up the two men who were on the verge of killing each other and asked them of the situation.

Both men explained the situation to Master and asked,

“Who would you side with?”

“Please hand over the loot and all your valuables to us.”

Then Master and the man both pointed their persuaders at the two travelers.

Frontispiece: “A Tale of a Tank” —Life Goes On.—[3]

Frontispiece

"A Tale of a Tank"

— Life Goes On. —

There was a traveler who goes by the name of Kino.

Kino was a considerably young person, but she's a master in using persuaders (Note: a gun), and has almost never lost to anyone.

Kino’s traveling companion was Hermes, a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly). The motorrad’s rear seat which was converted into a carrier was heavily loaded with luggage. It was because as a traveler, Kino goes all over the world to see various countries.

One time, Kino and Hermes were taking a noontime break in the forest.

From inside the dense forest penetrated by very little light, the tremendous sound of trees being mowed down was heard. The birds took flight amidst the commotion.

“What was that?” Kino was surprised. She raised herself from the fallen log she was sitting on.

“Ah, it’s a tank, Kino." Hermes who was parked on the narrow road said in reply. The sound of falling trees became increasingly louder and was eventually followed by tremors.

And a single tank came floating by.

It appeared in front of Kino and Hermes while it was making a road as wide as itself through the forest. The tank stopped as the last tree conspicuously snapped and collapsed. It was floating at a height about as tall as Kino. Its enormous body was surrounded by armor, and on its top was a revolving turret covered with broken branches and grass.

“Yo, mister motorrad and miss driver over there,” said the tank.

“Hello, mister tank. How is your lifter doing?” asked Hermes.

“Yup, it’s not bad. That's because I wasn't flying very high recently." The tank answered, and then asked, “ What are you two doing?”

“We are on a journey. ——What about you?” Kino asked, looking up at the tank’s gigantic frame. The tank answered after remarking that it was a good question.

“I had been looking for a tank.”

“A tank?”

“Yeah.”

“What will you do once you find it?” Hermes asked.

“Of course, I’m going to destroy it.”

Kino glanced over Hermes. “Destroy? You mean you’re going to shoot it down with your cannon?”

"Yes. As you can see, this is a very powerful weapon. It ’s a 200mm smoothbore tank cannon." [4]

In reply to Kino's question, the tank shook the protruding turret to the front. It was a long barrel with a thick portion in the middle. A number of thin white lines were painted from one end to the other, that it almost looked like a zebra's stripes.

“Then, why?”

“Because those were my orders.”

"Orders?"

“Yes,” the tank shook the barrel up and down. Hermes asked.

“Whose orders?”

“The tank commander's. The one who was riding me before, a sole human.”

“Before? Where is he now?”

“A long time ago, while sitting perfectly on his seat, he would hand me out various orders, and then perform my maintenance. We fought many times and defeated a lot of enemies. Look at the marks of destruction on my barrel. The truth is, because I have destroyed a lot of enemies, there’s no more space to draw another line. Isn’t that amazing? ——However, my commander died in a battle half a year ago. A stray bullet came in through the slightly opened hatch and bounced around inside. He

suffered only a little before dying, and soon his flesh rotted, and now, only his clothes, helmet, and white bones are left. Do you want to see it?”

“No, thank you,” Kino politely refused.

“And then, what about the order?”

“Yes. You see, my commander gave me the order right before he died. He told me to destroy a tank. A black tank, with three red vertical stripes drawn on the right and a tapir drawn on left side of its turret. The orders I received were to absolutely make sure that this tank is destroyed. I’ve been searching for it forever. Day and night, rain or fog, I search out this enemy. I was equipped with an excellent optical sensor, yet I still can’t find it even after such a long time. I did not find it in the battlefields, and now I’m trying to look from place to place. Hey, miss traveler, do you know? Have you seen such a tank?"

"No,” answered Kino, shaking her head.

“I see.... But, I shall go on looking for it from here on. I’m definitely going to find it. No matter what. ——

Because it’s something that I have to do. Because it’s something that has to be done.” The tank said, as though convincing itself.

“Is that so.... We will be resting here a while longer before we set off," said Kino.

“I see. Then I’ll go ahead. I have to search for it all over the place. Goodbye, mister motorrad and miss traveler.”

The tank started to advance once again. While floating, it advanced forward, mowing down the trees in its path without reserve. It advanced perfectly straight ahead.

“.....”

Kino stared at the back of the floating tank.

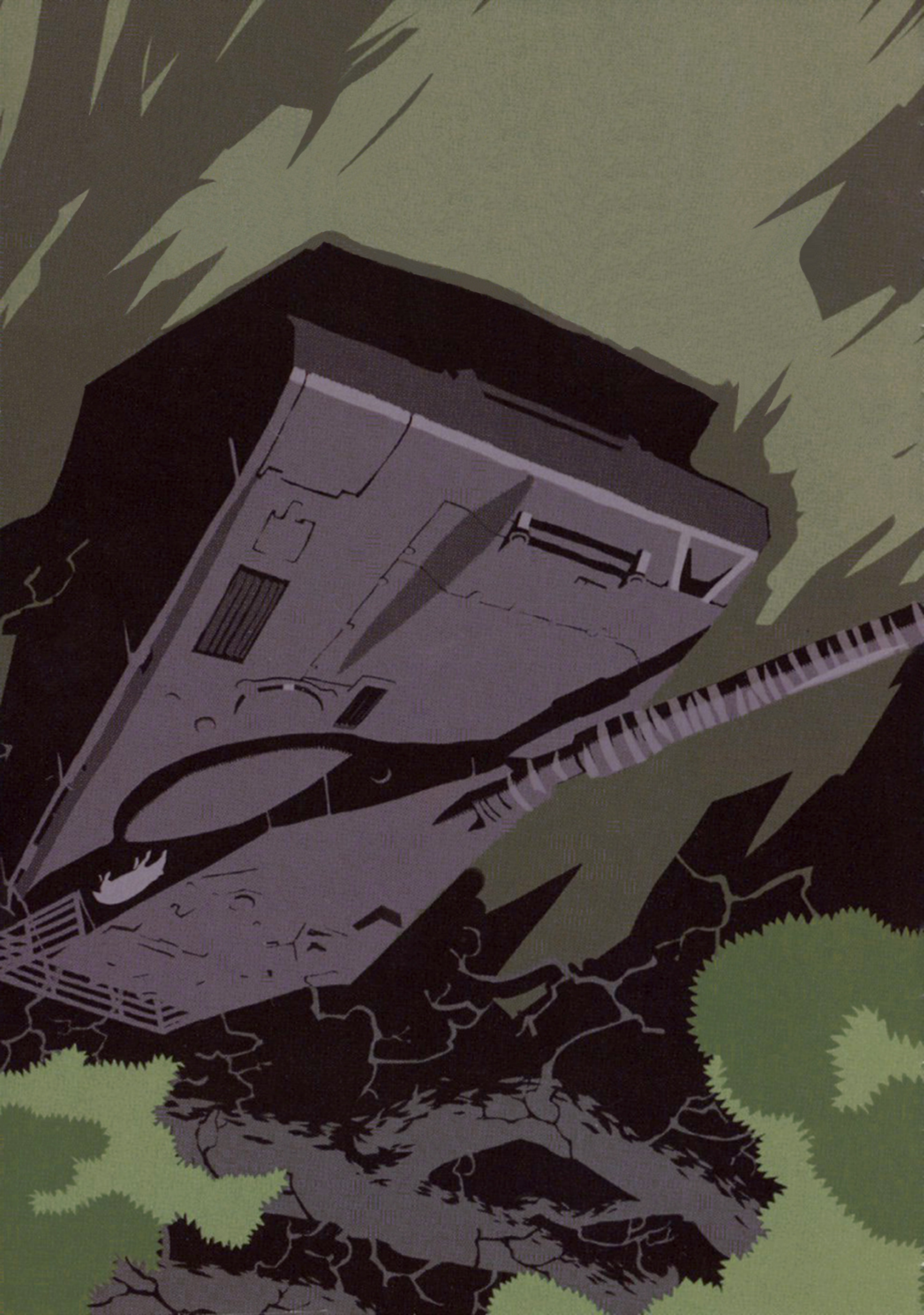
From her side, Hermes asked.

“So it was something like that, huh?”

“Yeah. But——”

Kino stared at the back of the floating tank.

She stared at the back of the tank until it can no longer be seen; a black tank, with three, red vertical stripes on the right side of its turret, and a picture of a tapir drawn on the left.



"A Pledge・b" —a Kitchen Knifeb—

And then, and then....

Oh! I don’t know what else I can write.

I think I'm gonna cry again.

In my mind I see the tray once more. Ah, my sight is blurring again!

How could I have found such happiness?

How could such happiness befall me?!

I will never, ever forget this day.

Perhaps I should write about something?

But what else might I write about?

Is there something else I ought to write about?

Today is such a wonderful day! I have said it too many

times today. Should I mention I've got a feeling that I won't be able to stop writing about it?

Wonderful thing, beautiful thing, precious thing, something I would never wish to lose, something I would give my life to protect, something I want to stay with together, forever——!

Oh God! I can’t stop this joy welling up in my heart. Were it not for the lateness of the hour, I would shout out the window, and dance in the streets.

I am never, ever going to forget this deep emotion my whole life. I swear!

Oh God, how could such happiness befall me?!

Today is a wonderful day.

No, tomorrow and everyday after will be!

This is no good. I am too drunk with joy to continue writing.

Perhaps, I should stop here. Yes, I should stop though it's against my will.

"Her Journey" —Chances— [5]

Chapter One

"Her Journey"

— Chances —

In a lush deep green forest, where lakes reflect the blue sky in its clear water, there was one country.

Inside this vast country, buildings were lined up with roads of various sizes laid out in between like spider webs.

At the western part of the country, by the walls, there was a gate. Beside the gate, a room was provided to deal with emigration procedures.

A single motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) was parked a little distance away from the room, in a place designated as a rotary square. It was a motorrad loaded with traveling luggage on top and on both sides of its rear wheel.

A person was leaning on the motorrad. It was the driver, who was wearing a black jacket, a belt tightened on the waist and a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) suspended from her right thigh. She was around mid-teens in age, with short black hair, big eyes and an intrepid expression. She was wearing a brimmed hat with goggles strapped around it.

There was nobody else in the square. Several birds were hopping around looking for food. The sun just above the eastern wall warmed the driver's back, and only its long shadow fell within the gates.

"Not yet? Kino," asked the motorrad.

"Not yet. Not a minute has passed since you asked that, Hermes," the driver called Kino answered.

A cleaning vehicle came, noisily rattling by the road.

The cleaning vehicle drove off the birds, dampened the wide road beside the square, and went away.

When the shadow became a little shorter,

"Not yet?" Once again, the motorrad called Hermes asked.

"Not yet," was Kino's short answer. Soon after the reply, the door of the room beside the gates opened.

"Hmm? I wonder if it's finished?" Hermes said, as a man came out of the room.

The man was about in his mid-thirties. For easy movement outdoors, he was wearing clothes which seem sturdy but easy to move in and a vest with several pockets for carrying various things. A rifle-type persuader hung on his back.

It was a military rifle with a body made of plastic, and with a sniper's scope with built-in night-vision and laser sight attached to it.

The man noticed Kino and Hermes, walked a few steps closer and gave them a morning greeting. Kino raised herself from Hermes and returned the greeting.

"Were you lined up for departure procedures? I'm sorry but there's one more person inside. It will take a little more time. The document screening is quite cumbersome," said the man.

"You are a citizen of this country? Going out on a journey?" Hermes asked.

"Yeah..., that's right," the man answered, his expression darkening a little.

Without the slightest ceremony, Hermes continued, “ But then, not a single one came to say goodbye? People here sure are cold.”

“That was harsh...” The man answered with a sour expression, and turned once to the room where he came out. The door was closed.

“Must be some complicated matter, huh?” Kino said. ‘ Sort of’, the man nodded.

“I couldn't tell this to anyone, but... if it’s outsiders like you, then I guess it’s fine. I don't mind sharing this story with another person. It’s good for passing time while waiting. Would you like to listen? As to why I am going out on a journey?” The man asked, looking straight at Kino.

Kino raised the brim of her hat a little. “Sure, go ahead .”

The man’s expression darkened a little, and then he let out a light laugh. As a preface, he said,

"It’s to obtain forgiveness. At any cost."

—

"To obtain forgiveness?" "What do you mean?" Kino and Hermes asked.

The man's mouth changed from a smile to one full of bitterness.

"I myself think that it's a strange reason.... But, it's important.... To me it's important..."

There was silence for a few seconds, and then Hermes asked, "That's it?"

"Ah, no—. Where should I begin? The one who will go with me on this journey is the one undergoing emigration procedures right now, a woman."

"A partner?"

"Yeah, sort of.... That person invited me to this journey .... I would travel with her to protect her in case she gets into trouble. And..., as to why..."

The man spoke in a gentle tone, "A long time ago, I killed her lover."

"....." "Huh?"

"It was seven years ago. I did not know her at all that time. I made a mistake.... It was illegal to drive a car after drinking alcohol, but I insisted; my attention and cognition have dropped.... I was driving too fast, and wasn't able to make a turn at the intersection..."

"Uh-huh, and then?"

"And then..., I hit a house.... That was not all. A person who was walking down the sidewalk got caught between the car and the house. In any case, I killed an innocent person..."

The man looked up at the dazzling morning sun, and breathed thin air.

"Then, I was arrested and taken into court.... At that time, the woman I told you about, that man's lover, confronted me. 'Murderer! Give him back!' she said. It was natural.... That's the only thing she can do.... That's how we first met..."

The man dropped his shoulders slightly, and Hermes spoke. "This story to kill time turned out to be quite a baby talk, huh?"

"... Heavy talk?"

"Yeah, that," Hermes said and fell silent.

Kino asked, "I see. And then, what did you do?"

"It was decided that I will serve 10 years in prison, and I was sent to the prison for traffic offenders. I lost my work, my life, everything. Well, both of my parents were dead, and I was not married, so there was only a few who were sad for me."

"The figures don't add up. Did you escape from jail?" Hermes said happily, and the man shook his head with a smile.

"I'm not finished yet. While in prison, I truly repented for what I did. And then, I sent her a letter. It contained my sincerest apologies. I wrote my honest feelings; that I wanted to do anything to atone for my sin.

"Uh-huh. And then?"

"And then, there was no reply at all. Even so, I continued to send out a letter every month. Even if only a little, I wanted her to know my sympathy for her loss, and my willingness to atone for my sin. I always send it together with a small amount of money that I receive from the prison."

The man looked back one more time. The door of the room, illuminated by the bright morning sun, was still closed.

"Six years passed. I was already quite accustomed with life in prison, and I have forgotten how a normal and free life felt like. At that time, all of a sudden, she came to visit me for the first time. I was surprised. Very surprised.... I looked at her through the glass; looked at the mountain of opened letters she was holding... and I apologized to her in tears. Just knowing that she actually read the letters made me very happy. But that's not all.

She asked me to lift up my face, and made a proposal that I would never have expected."

"To get out of the country, right?" Kino said in confirmation.

"Yes. ——She said she wanted to get out of this country because there were painful memories here. She wanted to go to a different country and start a new life. She asked me to come with her because she needed a bodyguard. I only have less than five years to serve in prison, and it seemed that it was possible for me to leave the country on one condition — that I am banned from entering it ever again. It was a loophole in an old law. More than this, I was surprised and asked her, 'You would want me to come with you, but aren't you bearing resentment against me?'"

"So?" "And then?"

"She then said this: 'I still have grudge and hate against you. But, you promised in your letters that you would do anything to atone for your sin. And so——'"

"What did you do?"

"I suffered. I suffered so much. After four years, I can finally get out of jail. However, it never crossed my mind that I had to go on a journey and leave my beloved homeland for eternity. In this country where I was born and raised and where my dead parents rest — I would have chosen to die and be buried here as well. I thought, after I got released from prison, that I would do my best to start my life over again. But——"

"But?"

"I thought this was the only way to atone for my sin.... Above all, she herself wanted to do it this way. I agonized over her proposal for about a year, before I decided to accept it. To never again return to this country , to become her escort to a journey that may continue for who knows how long. I told her this the next time she came to visit. I cannot describe how I felt when she said ' Thank you' to me with a gentle smile."

The man then held back the tears which suddenly came to his eyes. He excused himself for a while and turned away from Kino.

"I suppose this will be the last time I get to cry in this country," said the man in a low voice.

The door of the room was still closed. After some time has passed, the man looked up at the sky once more.

The man turned to Kino and Hermes.

"'Not yet,' I thought," said the man.

"I think she hasn't forgiven me yet. That's why I would like to atone for what i did. I don't know what sort of places we will go to, but I'm sure it will be a long journey. But this is not my journey, it's hers. And I'd like to think of this as my life's journey.... It starts from here on."

"I see. I understand it very well," Kino said to the man who seemed like he's going to cry once more.

"Well, each person's life is different from another's. Yup, it's quite interesting," said Hermes.

The man laughed a bit and faced Kino, "Thank you for listening. As my senior in traveling, is it okay if I ask you a question?"

"What would that be?"

"In traveling, what's the thing that I should be most careful of?"

"That's simple. It's the same as what you should do if you were living a normal life in a country," answered Kino immediately.

"What?"

"To not lose your life. Or, to not get killed. In other words, to do everything that you can to protect your own life. ——If you want to be more specific, to kill before you get killed."

"... I understand..."

The door of the room opened.

—

There was the woman who was about the same age and

wearing similar clothes as the man, with a small hand persuader hanging by her waist. She smiled happily as the man introduced Kino to her.

She learned that Kino would be going in the same direction. 'That's a pity, if we were going by car, we could travel together,' she said regretfully.

"But I have a very reliable escort," the woman said with a smile. Then, she saw the slightly sad expression of the man, faced him and smiled.

"Hey, Miss Kino. If you finish with the procedures and catch up with us, let's eat lunch together. I think we'll take a rest by the lake."

Upon being told this, Kino replied sincerely, "That would be nice."

A horse laden with luggage was waiting outside.

"Well, let's go," she said, and the other person slowly nodded.

The two passed through the gates.

"Grab what you can, when you can. [6] I'll try to catch up by noon," Kino said, while pushing along Hermes to the room by the gate.

"Kino is so greedy," said Hermes.

"Whatever," said Kino.

It was just before lunch when Kino and Hermes finished the procedures.

In the forest, there was a road. The road was wide enough for a car to run in comfortably.

Kino was riding Hermes at a considerable speed.

The wall of trees continued to flow on both sides of the road, and the beautiful blue hue of the lake occasionally appeared in and out of view. The sun was high up in the sky, spilling light in the gaps between the leaves and branches.

“Let’s exit through that curve ahead,” said Hermes, and Kino released the gas pedal.

As they exited through the not so visible curve ahead, they came upon the sandy shore of the lake on the left side of the road. Over there, two horses were tethered together, and two persons were sitting by taking a rest.

Kino dropped the gear. As she approached, the man with the rifle waved at her.

Kino stopped Hermes some distance away from the two, and pushed down the stand. While walking, she removed her goggles and hung it around her neck.

“Hello. I caught up.”

The man put down his cup and stood up,

"A motorrad is fast, after all. We just settled down here for tea."

Having his back to the woman, he made two steps towards Kino.

The woman pulled out the small hand persuader from her waist, and stood up slowly. She held the persuader in both hands and aimed it towards the back of the man right before her.

Bang.

She fired. The empty cartridge flew, and the bullet opened a hole in the man's shoulder. Kino backed away in one jump.

"Guh!" The man raised a cry, his body bent.

Bang.

A second bullet was fired, hitting the man's right thigh .

Bang.

A third bullet hit the left thigh.

The man soon lost his balance, and the rifle on his back was trapped underneath his fallen body.

The woman trotted towards the barrel of the rifle and stepped on it. And immediately, she fired on the man below, one bullet to the right arm, one bullet to the left arm, fired in quick succession.

Bang bang.

“Gyaah!” The man cried in reflex for each shot.

The woman pulled out and picked up the man’s rifle. She slung it on her back.

Being shot in several places, the man was lying face up on the ground, drenching it with a large amount of blood . With a surprised and vacant look on his face, he asked the woman who stood by side, looking down at him,

“Ah..., Why...? What...?”

The woman spoke calmly, without batting an eyelid. “I just shot you. Does it hurt?”

The man gave a small nod.

The woman nodded once, and asked Kino, who already backed away to Hermes' side, "Miss Kino. Would you shoot me to help him?"

Kino, whose hand was outstretched towards 'Canon' in her right thigh, quietly shook her head.

The woman returned her gaze to the man.

"W-why...?"

Greasy sweat surfaced on the man's face, along with pain, doubt and fear.

"Why I fired at you——, is that it?"

The man nodded, his eyes still wide open.

"Of course, it's to kill you."

"W-why?"

"Because I can't forgive you. Because you killed the most important person to me. I can't forgive you."

"....."

"That's not all. Those letters you sent every month. You wrote so many words of apology: 'I hope you somehow forgive me. I truly pray for his happiness in the afterlife.' As far as I'm concerned, those were nothing but selfish words. ——No, there are probably people willing to forgive in this world. Receiving a letter of repentance from a sinner, 'Ah, this person is also suffering. He is also a victim like me' ——I suppose there are people who think so. Probably, these people think 'What's done is done, there's nothing else we can do'. These people suffice for an 'I was mistaken'. Well, I am different. The grief it caused me, when you stole him away, just got bigger over time. It got worse every time I receive one of your letters. Each time I saw them, I was reminded that his killer is still living a carefree life. It made me suffer, I wasn't able to forgive..., and it hardened my resolve to take my revenge on you."

Blood slowly drained away from the man's face, and he can no longer move.

"Hey——" The woman's face did not change expression, and she continued to speak.

"This is what I think. When you appealed to the feelings of victim's family, saying 'I've reflected on what I've done,' the only thing you could think of was 'I said good things, so I will be saved', am i right? You were pleasing no one but yourself! Above all, what were you doing while I was suffering and in despair? You were safe in prison, living an orderly life, without having to fear going hungry or getting cold. And after ten years, you will be able to live openly as a free man, and live your life without anything to worry about anymore! You, a murderer, laughing and walking the streets with your lover——! You think something like that can be forgiven ? I won't allow it."

The man opened his mouth, "B-but..."

Bang.

The woman fired at the man's ear. The earlobe was torn, but the amount of blood which began to flow from it was nothing compared to his other wounds.

"Listen until I finish my story. ——And so I decided to take my revenge. I will lure you out of the country, to a place where the country's laws cannot be enforced. I will kill you with my own hands, on behalf of that man. That

was my plan. For that, I prepared for everything I need. So that I can appear before you with a calm demeanor, I trained myself to kill my emotions. I also practiced how to smile gently. ——And then, I worked desperately to be able to earn money for a journey. Even though I hated it, and would never have thought of touching one my whole life, I bought a persuader. I bought it with the money you sent me. After a while, I also trained my shooting skills to make sure that I can kill you when the time comes. I learned how to shoot in a way that will hurt the most. So? My plan worked rather well, don't you think? Were you listening?"

The woman peered over the face of the man.

The man was still lying on his back. Tears flowed down his temples from his unblinking eyes.

"No..." He muttered in a small voice.

"No... Not like this.... No..., I don't want to die... in a place like this... No..., I want to go back to my country.... I don't want to die..."

"I'm sure he thought that way, too," said the woman. Then she secured the safety of the hand persuader and returned it to its holster. She turned, and raised the man'

s rifle. She skillfully released the safety, and stood by the feet of the man sprawled on the ground.

She poised the rifle by her waist, switched on the laser sight of the scope, and aimed the tiny red dot of light at the man's jaw.

"Please... f-forgive me..." The man muttered, moving his pale lips a little.

The woman, with a very satisfied expression, nodded several times, and showed her gentle smile.

"Yes. The truth is I really wanted to forgive you. I wanted to forgive you all along. You wrote, 'I'll do anything to atone for my sin'. That's why I'm ending your life. ——The earlier I end your suffering, the better, don't you think?"

She fired.

For each shot, the woman's body gets pushed back a little in recoil. She continued to shoot amidst the recoil.

In a lush deep green forest, where a lake reflects the blue sky in its clear water, there stood two humans.

Beside two horses tethered together, there was a motorrad, ——and a headless human stretched out on his back.

The woman crouched slowly, and placed the empty rifle on the ground.

Her expression was now as clear as the sky. Her face looked happy.

“Yes...” The woman spoke to the man.

“Finally, I can forgive you. Listen well. I forgive you. That’s what you wanted right? That’s what you wished from the bottom of your heart, wasn’t it? That wish, I now grant it to you. You are forgiven. Hey, listen, ——I forgive you.”

There was a fresh mound by the shore. A rifle was pierced on it as a grave marker.

In front of it, the woman was kneeling down, hands clasped in front of her face, praying.

Before long she stood up, turned, and asked the person behind her.

“Miss Kino, you could have shot me if you wanted. Why?”

“Because I’m not a God. That’s all.”

“Yup. Kino is Kino,” said Hermes.

“I see. ——Thank you for helping me make a grave.”

“You’re welcome.”

The woman approached the man's horse, with all of its harness removed, and gently spoke to it. "Now you can go to a place you like. Living freely in the forest is okay; living for someone back in the gates is also good."

Then she tapped the horse lightly. The surprised horse moved forward a little, looked back once, and then disappeared into the forest.

"So, what will you do after this?" Kino asked the woman.

"My journey is already over, so I will go back to the country. I intend to live with his memories until I die."

"I see. Take care."

"Thank you. Ah, sorry I couldn't join you for lunch."

"It's okay."

The woman collected her luggage, those which were not buried, and fastened them to her horse. Then she lightly straddled the horse, and waved with a smile,

"Goodbye"

The horse carrying the woman disappeared on the other side of the trees by the curve.

—

"Phew..." Kino breathed.

"Really, things happened just as you said, Kino. I was a little surprised, but I'm quite impressed," Hermes said happily.

"I suppose so.... Now, let's grab what we can, while we can."

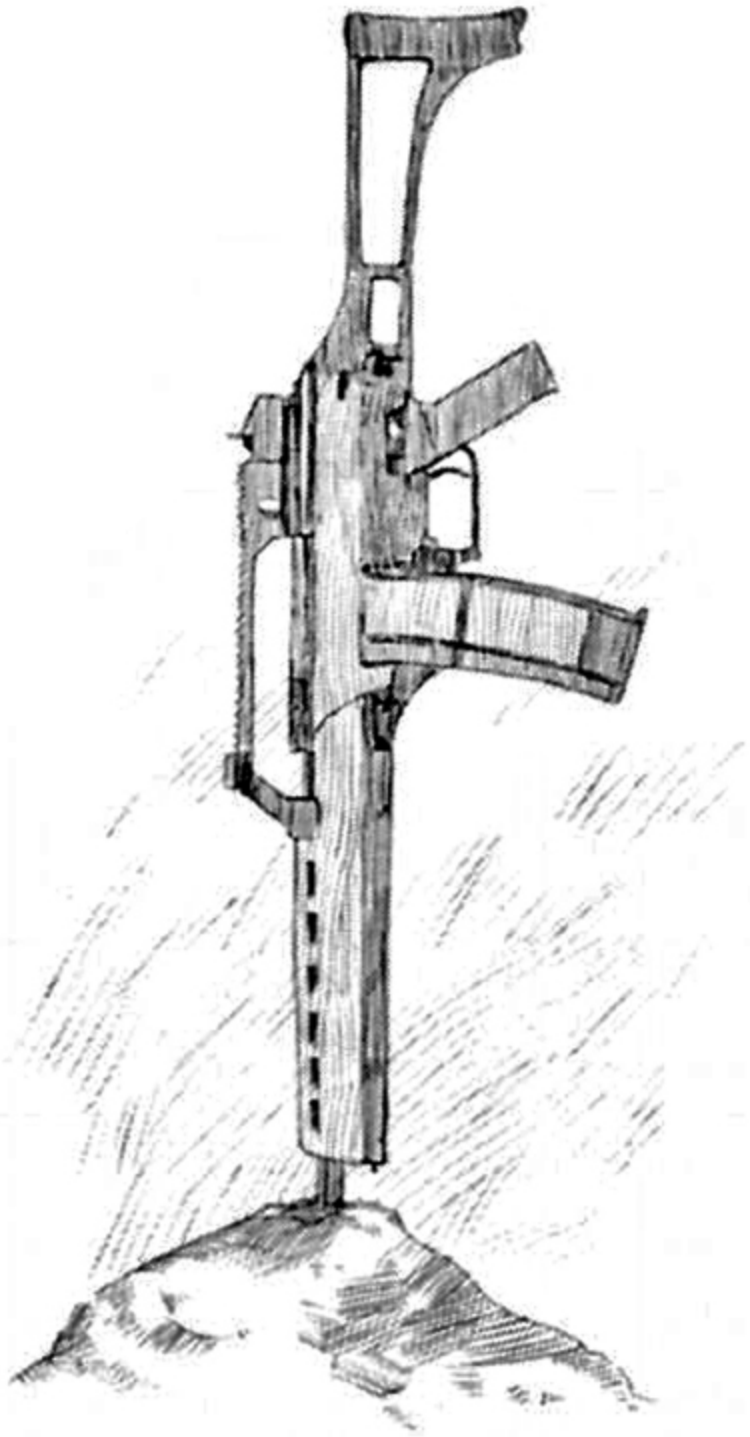
"Kino is so greedy," said Hermes.

"Whatever..." said Kino.

On the shore where the motorrad ran, there was a fresh mound.

There, a rifle was pierced as a grave marker.

It was a military rifle with a body made of plastic, but the scope was no longer attached.



“Her Journey” —Love and Bullets— [7]

Chapter Two

“Her Journey”

— Love and Bullets —

Building-like rock structures were lined up on the sandy land.

A bizarre space was created by hundreds of these rock pillars which towered over the land, acting as if the erosion from wind and rain was nothing.

Only a small amount of thin grass grew on the dry sand. The hot, dry wind was blowing occasionally through the spaces between the pillars. There was not a single cloud in the sky.

There were three humans beside one of the stone pillars. They were sitting underneath its short shadow.

One was a young person, wearing a white shirt and a black vest, with a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) suspended on her right thigh. Behind, a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) loaded with traveling luggage was parked on its center stand.

The other two were a man and a woman in their late twenties who were wearing thin clothing. The woman

had a slender face, and her long hair was tied behind her. In contrast, the man had a good body build. Behind the two, there were two luggage-laden horses.

"Then, what's this important thing you want to talk about?" The young person asked.

"That is, I am appealing to you, Miss Kino, to stop using violence from now on," the woman said.

The person called Kino let out a slightly surprised expression.

The woman looked straight at Kino with a serious face.

"I believe that instead of violence, kind feelings and overflowing love should come from the bottom of our hearts, and that conflicts should be avoided. I believe that this is the only righteous thing to do in the world. I would like to share this to you, Miss Kino, for you to practice in your journey from now on. It is not difficult. Love can solve all problems."

The man sitting behind the woman stayed silent. He did not interfere, and just smiled quietly as he sat and watched over them.

“I may be forcing my way of thinking but, I think it is not impossible for all humans in this world to be one in thought. No matter what kind of person, wouldn’t he want water when his throat is dry? That’s an idea we all share in common, isn’t it? In exactly the same way, we can have the same belief: ‘There shouldn’t be any disputes between humans. Love can solve everything.’ And――”

The woman's tone became passionate.

“――After all, in the end all that is needed is love — an affectionate heart for others. The most important thing is love. It is inside everyone. It is a wonderful thing. If everyone uses the love that they have, and conflicts disappear, then our lives will be――”

She appealed, ignoring the sweat beading on her forehead.

“――With this, you surely understand why humans should not have weapons. If you realize that there is no need for fights, then there is no need for weapons either. Let’s guide this world one step further, united with one idea, with one concept of love. If everyone heads towards the same direction and make themselves lighter by

throwing away the things they don’t need, only love will remain! The point is to make contact with such people! That is——”

Kino quietly listened to the woman’s fervent speech, making small nods while looking at her eyes.

“——Therefore, humans can live without conflicts. I myself practice this! I don’t carry a single weapon with me. I have met a variety of people during my journey, and I have never been in danger, not even once. The man behind me carries one, but he doesn’t use it except for hunting. Isn’t that amazing! It’s because I connect with the people through love, no one feels the need to be violent towards me! Isn’t it wonderful?! Everyone understands. People can understand each other! And so ——”

The woman continued to talk frantically of her idea. Her speech continued on and on.

After some time has passed,

“——There! That’s everything I want to say!”

The woman, now drenched with sweat, finished her speech at last. She took a deep breath, and drank the already cold tea the man from behind passed to her.

"If it's okay with you, please let me hear what you think about what I just said."

Kino looked at the woman and spoke gently.

"I think it's wonderful. I understood and absorbed everything that you said. Up to now, I have never hesitated to shoot in order to protect my life. But now, I see that it's possible to have no need for such."

"Yes! Exactly!" the woman said, almost bouncing with joy.

"From now on, I will also use your idea of 'love', and try to live without harming people. For starters, I would sell my persuaders to the next country I'm going to."

"Yes. You did understand. I'm so glad!"

With narrowed eyes, the woman came in front of Kino and grasped both of her hands firmly.

“I’m so happy! I’m glad I met you, Miss Kino! From now on, if you find people who are like the previous you, who thinks violence is fine and has not wakened up to love and truth, please tell them this idea! If you do so, and everybody else shares this to everyone, then the number of people who will be awakened to love and truth will multiply, and soon all humans will use love to resolve conflicts! Okay? Ah..., thank you for listening to me!”

—

“Well then, we’ll be on our way. Be careful in your travels.” Kino stood up as she said this. She lifted the motorrad’s stand.

“Thank you. I’m sure everything will be fine. Let’s meet again somewhere!”

The woman waved happily. Kino bowed once to the two, pushed her motorrad, and went out to the sandy soil from underneath the rock pillar.

“Let’s go Hermes. That took lots of time,” she said to the motorrad.

“Yup,” was the small response of the motorrad called Hermes.

The man stood up as if he remembered something.

“Let me show the way to Miss Kino,” he said to the woman and followed Kino.

There were two hand persuader holsters on each side of the man’s hips, positioned in a way for him to be able to shoot with two hands. They were .45 caliber types, with extended magazine capacity. On the tip of the barrel , there was a screw thread for attaching a silencer.

The man went away from the woman and approached Kino who was just starting Hermes’ engine.

And he began to speak.

“Miss Kino, Hermes, thank you so much for listening to her boring and long-winded speech. And also, thank you for making her happy. You have my gratitude,” the man said with a smile.

Kino smiled wryly.

“If you weren’t right behind, we would have walked off right in the middle of her speech.”

“Hahaha. I thought you’d say something like that,” the man laughed gleefully.

Kino narrowed her eyes a little and spoke in a soft voice.

“One week ago, we found thirty men dead by a rocky area. All of them were killed without being able to fight back. I noticed .45 caliber bullets in their skulls. ——It was you, right?”

The man nodded.

“They did listen to her speech. However, I somehow figured later on that they were going to kill me and attack her because they were always following us. I took care of them silently,” the man said without batting an eyelash.

“This may be rude but... why is it that a person as skilled as you became her escort?”

“Yup, yup. That’s weird. It’s completely the opposite of what she was preaching.”

Kino and Hermes asked.

“Because I love her,” the man replied with a serious face. [8]

“Huh?” “Eh?”

“I’ve loved her for a long time. ——We were born in the same country, and were friends since we were young. She had been an anti-violence advocate even back then. She believes that violence will never do any good, and we will all be better off with love. But I have a completely opposing belief — those with no power cannot do anything. And believing that I can’t protect others if I’m weak, I learned all sorts of things necessary in combat such as martial arts, persuaders, and so on. After graduating from school, I joined the army. She was still completely engrossed in her ideals, and thought I was absurd to do so. And, I wonder when it started. I loved her from the bottom of my heart. My reasons do not matter. I love her. Whenever I would meet up with

her when I go home on holidays, she would always remind me of how foolish violence is, but those were the happiest days of my life.”

The man took a glimpse behind. Sitting beside the rock , the woman was gazing up at the sky with a satisfied look on her face.

“One day, she said all of a sudden, ‘I’ll get out of this country, and go to a journey to preach love and non-violence. That will be my mission.’ She did not listen to the desperate pleas of the people around her, and began to make preparations for her departure. I quit the army and asked her to let me accompany her on her journey.”

“And she allowed you,” Kino asked.

“Well, it was simple. I said, ‘I left the army because I was moved by your wonderful ideals. Together, let’s appeal for love and non-violence. I want you to take me along, even if it’s just to carry your luggage.' She agreed immediately.”

“Okay...” “I see.”

"Even if I cannot completely practice her ideals, I still love to see her positive attitude. I love to see her recklessly pursuing her dreams. I want to protect her. ——I don't care about principles or ideals, if it's to protect her and stay by her side. I'll stand by her. I'll kill people, even if that would make me seem to be the bad guy. I don't care if I turn the whole world my enemy," the man said quietly.

"You'd annihilate everybody then," Hermes jested from below.

Kino muttered,'I see', and then said, "Your story is much more interesting than hers."

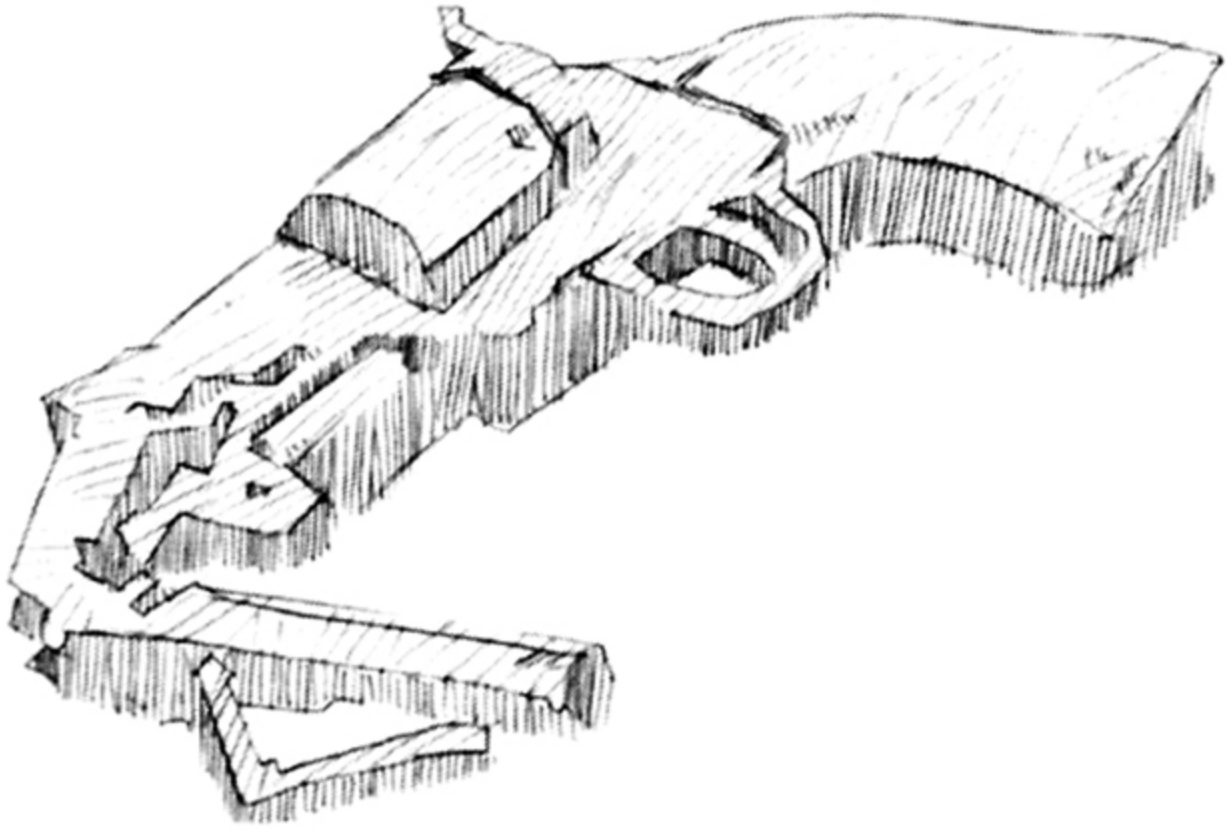
"Thanks. Take care. It would be nice if we can meet again somewhere."

The man held out his right hand. And then,

"Until then, do not hesitate to shoot anyone who tries to kill you."

"Thank you very much. I'll do that."

Kino gripped his hand.



“Land of Fireworks” —Fire at Will!—

Chapter Three

“Land of Fireworks”

— Fire at Will! —

“It’s so hot—, Kino,” said a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly).

Two boxes were attached on both sides of its rear wheel, and loaded on top of it was a big bag, a sleeping bag and fuel cans. It was parked on its stand.

“It’s hot,” was the short answer of the motorrad’s driver called Kino.

She was a young person, with short black hair and big eyes. She was wearing a black vest over a white shirt, with a belt loosely fastened around her waist. A hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) holster was attached on her right thigh.

A number of low, smooth mountains were lined up, the grounds of which were covered with forests. The motorrad was parked on the lone forest road. The reddish earth of the road was surrounded left and right with trees, obstructing the view.

Kino was sitting beside the road, under the shadow made by a thick tree.

The forest was filled with warm air, the human being tormented with the unforgiving hot and humid air. Only the tops of the tall trees were privileged with the blowing wind, fluttering comfortably. Hundreds of crickets from near and far the forest were making tremendous noise in all ways possible.

Kino took a sip from the water flask in her hand.

“And, lukewarm too.”

“I know right?”

Even while sitting and not doing anything, sweat was trickling down Kino’s cheek. She looked up; not a single cloud can be seen in the sky, only the intense summer glare. She looked down; the lights and shadows were in stark contrast with each other on the road. An ant walked by.

“It would be nice if air-conditioning technology existed in the next country.... I want to sleep for at least three days,” Kino murmured.

“What if the next country does not even have a shower , or an electric fan, let alone air-conditioning?”

“I don’t want to think about it,” Kino said, and stood up. She dusted off her bottom, put away the water flask in the box, and wore the hat she was using as a fan earlier.

“Let’s go, Hermes. We should be arriving soon.”

The motorrad called Hermes gave his consent.

Kino sat on the motorrad and started the engine. The engine made a loud noise, and at the same time, the crickets on a nearby tree cried noisily, as if competing with it.

The noisy sounds reverberated through the humid forest.

—

“At long last,” Kino said as she quickly stopped on the forest road. On one side of the steep slope, there were no trees and there was an open view.

From a distance, they can see a green ragged land and silver-colored walls. The walls stretched up and down along the delicate mountain ridges.

"You may be able to swim,” said Hermes. On the left side of the walls, in the south, they can barely see something blue which was not the sky.

—

The road proceeded consistently and descended into a valley. And finally, it reached the walls.

“This is amazing,” said Hermes. Kino stopped, and looked up at the big wall.

The height of the walls from the bottom of the valley was tremendous. It filled the gap in the valley like a dam, exceeding the height of the mountains on its either side. It stood level with the walls towering above the mountains. Kino and Hermes were in its shadows.

The wall surface was smooth and of a dull silver color. Here and there were traces of lined up plates of the same material. Hermes wondered aloud.

"Is it stone? It doesn't seem to be metal."

"It looks hard."

And on the road ahead, a gate made of similar material was tightly shut. They soon realized that there was nothing short of a guardroom by the gates. There was nobody nearby. There were no houses around.

Eventually, in the middle of the cricket sounds, Kino dismounted from Hermes and approached the gate. And,

"There's a button-like thing here, placed where a person can reach it."

"Maybe you should push it."

Kino pushed.

Ding-dong.

A flat electronic sound rang out of thin air.

Kino took her hat off and wiped the sweat from her forehead.

‘Ye-s? Oh, a traveler, is it? We will open it shortly, please go ahead and enter.’

And then, the gate slowly and quietly slid upwards.

“There’s no screening? How careless,” Hermes said. Kino also found it strange,

“.....”

And soon understood when the gate was fully opened.

Beyond the gate, a bit further away, was another gate.

—

After passing through the second wall in the same manner,

“.....”

There was a third one. The gate in front did not open until the gate behind them was completely closed.

The area between the two walls was not exposed to the sun, and is dark, but the air was stale and humid. Kino looked up and saw a slice of the sky.

Through the same thin gap, she could see both sides of the mountain; the trees had been cut off. On the high, grassy slope, a number of big rectangular box-like objects were stacked.

“I see. In times of emergency, they drop and blow up those things to block the gate and the road,” said Hermes .

After passing through the third gate, there was a fourth one, and they saw a building which seemed embedded to the wall.

The immigration inspector was waiting in front of the building to guide Kino inside. She passed through the door and entered.

“.....”

The moment she entered, the guide saw Kino took a big breath upon quietly coming indoors.

“Oh, is it too cold?” the inspector asked.

—

Without much screening, Kino and Hermes received an entry permit.

Kino and Hermes were welcomed and informed that they were the first ones to come for more than half a year , as travelers do not visit often.

“By the way, did you come here to watch the fireworks display, Miss Kino and Mr. Hermes?” One of the examiners, a middle-aged woman, asked.

Kino shook her head, and the examiners were slightly surprised.

“That is very fortunate. Tomorrow night, our annual summer fireworks display will be held at the beach by the south. Please have a look at it. It’s very pretty,” the lady examiner said.

—

Past the walls, the road was once again running through the forest valley. This time it was a highway. The road was wide and paved perfectly and there were streetlights .

Kino spread out the map she got.

The country was comprised of mountains for the most part, and there was a gulf into the southern side. It was enclosed with walls, though its marks were as small as the letters on the last line of an eye chart.

In the middle of the coastal area was a long crescent-shaped beach, from the center of which a boulevard extended due north. Only this part had flat

lands, and both sides of the street were dense with residential areas. At the north end of the street, drawn against the mountainous backdrop were buildings and sites probably reserved for government facilities.

“We’re here right now.” Kino pointed at the gate on the easternmost point. There was still some distance away to the center of the country.

—

Kino and Hermes rode to the west. The road was sewn on the mountain’s surface, continuing through repeated curves. The paved road was wide and there were guardrails.

“So easy,” said Hermes.

Kino and Hermes rode on the pavement reflecting the intense sunlight. Before long, they saw an enormous graveyard on the mountainside to the right. The gravestones were lined up neatly on the slopes like terraced fields.

Further ahead, the valley gradually opened up. The number of houses increased bit by bit, as well as the number of cars coming and going. The cars were all the same except for the color, as they were all rustic four-wheel-drive vehicles.

“Hmm? Kino, this country only has those kinds?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they’re in fashion?”

After exiting the valley, they arrived into the flat area which was the country’s center. In addition, the number of buildings and people suddenly increased, and both sides of the road were almost filled.

They rode through the boulevard towards the center. On one side, a certain number of streets through the boulevard extend to the south, towards the sea. The number of cars on the road increased as nightfall approached. There was a high road at the center of the boulevard, planted with trees. The sidewalk served as a resting place and people holding umbrellas walked by.

Upon turning to the right, they stopped at the intersection. A big armored vehicle suddenly came out from a street and made a turn right in front of Kino and

Hermes. The enormous armored vehicle had an angular body, with eight wheels, each one the size of a child. However, it was unarmed and clad in a fancy orange color.

Upon turning, the armored vehicle immediately stopped by the sidewalk. The steel door at the back opened and a normal looking person got off. Then, the sweaty people on the sidewalk went aboard. When everybody was inside, the door closed, the signal went off, and it rode off once more.

"Kino, was that supposed to be a bus?"

"Probably. Maybe it's in fashion."

At the back of the street was a three-storey building, the hotel the inspector told Kino about.

Kino and Hermes passed through the entrance. The air-conditioning was working perfectly. The difference in temperatures was so immense that the outside world shut out by the two-door entrance seemed like a totally different world.

The manager welcomed and guided them to their room. It was not spacious, but it was not cramped either.

"It's cool and refreshing," Kino said while falling on her back to the bed, looking at the ceiling.

"Ok, ok. Don't sleep just yet, unload the luggage first. There are things you have to do first, right?" Hermes scolded.

"Yeah..."

Kino got up abruptly and unloaded the luggage from Hermes.

She took out a pouch from inside the bag. Inside was a dirty shirt among other items.

"Cleanliness first. Are you planning to mix in with the crowd wearing a sweaty, stinky shirt?"

"**Sigh**..."

Afterwards, Kino asked if she could borrow a washing machine. She was encouraged to pay for a cleaning service, but she refused and took the machine instead.

It was already evening when all the dirty clothes were finished drying on a stretched rope inside the room.

“Good job.”

“I’m so tired.”

And then Kino ate her supper, took a shower, and immediately went to bed.

—

The next day.

Kino woke up at the crack of dawn.

She maintained all of her persuaders, practiced her quick draw exercises without making much noise, and took another shower.

She then folded and returned the completely dried clothes to the bag.

During breakfast, there were small explosive *ponpon* sounds heard from outside. She was told that those were signals indicating that the fireworks display will push through, since the weather remained as is.

After tapping Hermes awake, Kino went out sightseeing.

The weather was sunny. Several cotton-candy-like clouds were floating, and the intense and dazzling sunlight shined down since morning. The temperature was high, showing no signs of getting lower.

Kino and Hermes were advised to visit the government facilities at the end of the boulevard. Only a few people on holiday can be seen. Formerly religious structures, the buildings were characteristically made of wood. On the north side was a dense forest, spread to the back of which was a park and a pond. There was a stage, with a roof explaining that it was once a 'Historic Dance Hall'.

There were long stairs along the slope, and Kino alighted from Hermes to climb it. She looked back at the scenery and saw the straight road up against the beach and the sea. The blue of the sky reflected by the sea was

dark and in stark contrast with the blue of the water near the coast; it was as if there were two types of water. The horizon ran on the space between the green capes on both sides. On the cape was the tip of the walls running along the mountain ridge. Over there, a high lighthouse was built.

Kino went down the stairs, and saw that Hermes became a roost for a large number of doves in the park.

“Ah—, Kino? I don't mind if you shoot and eat these birds,” the white mass which was Hermes spoke.

—

“It’s still so hot.”

“What if you swim?”

Kino and Hermes went south the boulevard, and came out to the coast.

The road ran along the expanse of the beautiful, arched beach. The sandy coast was lined up with simple houses which had become restaurants and inns.

The beach was full of people taking a dip. Kino and Hermes stopped beside the road.

"....."

And looked at the scenery before them.

"Just what you need. Do you have a bathing suit?" Hermes said.

There were naked bathers, who seemed enjoying themselves while swimming.

After having lunch back in the hotel,

"I'll prepare for sitting-up late."

Kino maxed out the air-conditioner and then crawled to bed underneath several layers of blankets and comforters.

"This is *the life*..."

“Destined to poverty.”

“Wake me up on time.”

“Ok, ok.”

—

It was soon past noon.

Kino woke up naturally, and headed to the coast with Hermes. They rode through the boulevard and arrived at the sandy beach.

Slowly, people began to gather. Many of the stalls by the roadside were open, and colorful mats were laid out on top of the sand.

Kino gave up on the beach and parked Hermes on his center stand by the sidewalk. She sat down beside the guardrails.

As she sat down, Kino looked at the increasing number of people and waited.

As the sun slowly approached the mountains, the western sky brightened into a reddish-orange color. The huge fireball sank to the other side of the walls. The lights of the stores opened.

A number of vessels and ships were floating off the bay’s shore. Medium-sized ships with silver hulls were lined up, and large sheets were covering something bulging on the decks. Many vehicles were parked on both sides of the bay, as well as on the mountainside. As expected, there were also bulges covered by large sheets.

“They will probably be launching the fireworks from the ships and from over there.”

“I see. Kino, have you seen fireworks before?”

“It’s the first time I’ll see see something this large-scale .”

As more people gathered on the beach, the congestion on the road became less. Kino let Hermes wait for a while , and soon brought back a paper bucket the size of a flowerpot.

“What’s that?”

“It’s being sold in the stalls over there. It’s a dessert of finely crushed ice with sweet syrup and sugar-boiled beans on top. It may be risky, but it’s worth trying. It’s cold and yummy.”

Upon saying this, Kino put a big spoon of ice in her mouth.

“Ice? You better not ruin your tummy,” said Hermes.

The sun was setting. The afterglow was sucked into the western sky and vanished. The blue color began to appear under the sky, and a weak wind began to blow from the right side of the beach. The remaining heat in the road dissipated from below.

When Kino has eaten much,

“Uh,” she said with a frown.

"What's the matter?"

"I discovered something about this."

"What?"

"When I eat a lot of it at once, my head hurts..."

"Hah! I told you."

—

In the thin darkness, small explosive *ponpopon* sounds were heard, and three white billows of smoke drifted into the air.

'E-hem, good evening everyone. The weather is good, and there are no evening showers to worry about——' A laid-back announcement began.

'——Uhm—, well then, let's begin the fireworks display.'

There was a round of applause. People wearing work clothes on top of the launch pads on top and on both sides of the ships removed the neatly tuckered sheets which were for protection from the rain.

Suddenly, the ships were set alight.

From the ships lined side-by-side, bright red grains of light bubbled up into the air. Hundreds of thousands of grains made up a red fountain in the dark sky. The sound of intermittent explosions, akin to clothes being torn apart, echoed through the beach one beat later.

Along with the audience’s applause, the grains of light continuously soared in the sky, drawing a high parabola across the sky to the other side of the sea.

Soon, the red fountain born from the ships flickered out. The column of light extended straight and sprinkled on both sides. It was like a curtain swaying in the wind.

After the lights stopped and the last grains have flown up, the lights gushed vibrantly once again. A ray of light came running across the deep purple sky in a rhythm. These also came from the ships, the slightly blurred silhouettes of which were enveloped with an intense yellow light, and was reflected in the sea for some time.

At the same time as the light from below disappeared, red streaks of light extended from the launch pads on both sides. The extremely fast grains of light flowed, intersected in the middle of the air, and drifted to the other side of the mountain.

“As expected, a large-scale fireworks display is really different,” Kino said.

“No, I think this is different from normal,” Hermes said reservedly.

“You think so?” Kino said while looking at the streaks of light running in the sky.

“Normally, you don’t use something like *those* in a fireworks display,” Hermes said while looking at the object on top of the ship —— a rotating, six-barreled .20mm Gatling gun firing a hundred rounds per second.

“But it’s so pretty,” Kino said while the dazzling lights were reflected from her eyes. Once again, grains of light spewed forth from below and from both sides, and intersected at a single point. A huge triangle was drawn.

And then, after consuming several ten thousand rounds, it suddenly stopped.

—

While smoke floated on the sky,

‘Please wait until we’re finished with the preparations for the next fireworks,' the announcement resounded through the beach.

Kino carried a mouthful of ice to her mouth.

The ships which fired the column of fireworks a while ago moved out of the way, and soon the bay was empty.

'Uhm—, thank you for waiting. You will witness the traditional annual underwater fireworks in a moment.'

A single ship began to cross the bay at a high speed from left to right. Round lumps were continuously rolling and falling off from its stern.

Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom.

There were big explosions in the water. A column of seawater went up with a deep orange pillar of flame in its center. The water and flame structure stayed above the sea for just a moment. Another pillar went up almost at the same time as the one before it collapsed. The evenly spaced vibrations of the explosions reached beyond the beach towards the road.

The pillars ran across the bay as if chasing the ship, which was now running from right to left. It traveled back and forth across the bay.

“Those were fuel-filled depth charges. [9] What a waste .” Hermes’ mutterings were erased by the crowd’s applause.

—

They waited until the smoke settled again,

‘Uhm—, then, for this year’s featured fireworks, please look to your left.’ The tension-free narration said once more.

From the dark and barely visible launch pad on the left , a long and narrow flame spouted for a moment. A smokeless flame erupted towards the sky from the tail of a large cylinder. At the same time, a small smoke began to billow from the side as the cylinder started to rotate. Square boxes were closely packed like fish scales on the cylindrical body.

It went across right in front of the audience for a moment.

Bright little fireballs were released into the air in quick succession from the boxes as the cylinder rotated. The fireballs were shot from the tip to the back of the accelerating cylinder in perfect timing.

In an instant, a spiral was drawn high in the sky.

The long and enormous spiral of light spread out into full view. It stretched into the sky like a round corridor. The pupils of the audience dilated, the little openings became darker than the sky. The expecting crowd raised a cheer louder than before.

The spiral of light collapsed, but the light continued to shine, and fell from the midsummer sky like snow. The number of falling particles was doubled by the calm sea which reflected the lights like a black mirror.

Soon the snow of the sky and the sea approached each other, touched the water, and together disappeared for eternity. The beach grew quiet as the last of the particles disappeared.

The surface-to-surface missiles [10] carrying a flare dispenser [11], have flown far, far away, never to come back.

The fireworks display continued. The intense light slowly came down while flickering and shaking in the air . In addition, hundreds of white flashes burned back. Red streaks of light came running, weaving through the shaking sky. From left and right, flares attached on

parachutes, cannon shells, and rounds from Gatling guns fired on timed programming.

The sky was so bright that the beach looked as if it was daytime. Suddenly Kino looked to the left and to the right.

On the road were people watching the fireworks — families with their children, lovers, groups of friends; the memories of the day left on their happy, illuminated faces.

“.....”

Kino half-rose from the guardrail, took three steps towards Hermes, and suddenly sat down on the carrier.

“What?” Hermes asked, the light being reflected from his tank.

“Ice. Do you want some?” Kino offered the bucket to Hermes.

“I'll pass, but thanks for the offer."

“You’re welcome.”

While sitting on Hermes and watching the wild dance of light particles, Kino slid down the last of the almost melted ice down her throat.

—

The wind coming from the sea blew stronger, and the chilly air began to be felt.

The crazily shining sky suddenly became quiet. Several gunshots discreetly resounded, signaling the end of the fireworks display.

People began to go home, some by foot, and some via the armored vehicle buses.

While observing the people rising from the beach, talking with smiles on their faces, and passing in front, and while listening to the sound of the sea breeze, Kino and Hermes waited for the road to get less congested.

Kino had a cup of tea in the lobby upon returning to the hotel. When the manager asked her of her impression

of the fireworks display, Kino answered that it was very beautiful.

“It was very beautiful, but don’t you think using that much weapon and ammunition was very wasteful?” Hermes asked. The middle-aged manager with receding hairline was slightly surprised.

“Eh, did you not hear the reason for it?”

“No.” “Not at all.”

“Oh, then let me explain. Those were ‘gifts’," the manager said as he sat in front of Kino.

"Those were not manufactured in our country. You saw the ship didn’t you? Unmanned ships with containers on board come to the beach once a month. They always contain a variety of military weapons.”

“Were those literally gifts?” “Where did it come from? ”

“We have no idea at all who sent them, and for what reason. It seems that it suddenly came more than a hundred years ago, when this country was still small. And since nobody came to take them back, well, we were

just grateful and assumed that they were gifts from heaven. Eventually, we got used to receiving them."

“I get it. Those four-wheel drives and armored vehicles were ‘gifts’ too, right?”

“That’s right. Thanks to those, transportation became a breeze, and we were able to expand the country. The ships became handy in catching fish. We disassembled the containers and used them as material for buildings and walls. However, there was one problem.”

“What is it?”

"Surplus. The number of items we received was just too much. Everyone wished to have a vehicle because it was so easy to obtain them, but as a result, the roads were always congested. Also, we were building a fourth wall before we knew it. We couldn’t do anything about the increasing surplus, and the containers became a nuisance had to be thrown away in that mountain.”

“Eh? Those weren’t traps for defense?” Hermes asked, surprised, and the manager shook his head.

“Definitely not. There’s no need for such measures. Up to now, this country has never been attacked, not even

once. To begin with, this country doesn’t even have an army. It’s because there’s not a single country close by.”

“That’s why there was also an excess of weapons,” said Kino.

“That’s right. Whether it be missiles, or machine guns, or bombs; a lot of these ridiculous things were included. For a while, we discarded them to the mountain in the country’s outskirts along with the other trash, but there was a time when a lightning bolt caused a big explosion, and there was an outrageous uproar. We had no choice but to consume them all by firing them off to the sea, but that time, we were flooded with complaints about the noise.”

“So the fireworks display was—,” Hermes said.

“Exactly. We changed our way of thinking. One year, a lot of people gathered to watch the weapons being violently consumed. We solved our problem, killing two birds with one stone. Now, we have a festival to represent this country, something that everybody can look forward to. It becomes flashier year after year. Even now, I’m looking forward for next year’s display.”

The next morning. In other words, the third morning since Kino entered the country.

Kino left from the western wall. Once again, she went through the forest road.

She was soon a long way off from the country, between the green forest and the blue sky, in the middle of climbing a steep slope.

“Ah, someone’s there,” Hermes said. Kino released the accelerator.

They were on the mountain’s summit. There was no visibility among the trees. Over there were people in green.

They were wearing green camouflage uniforms, green hats, and their faces and hands were painted green. They were carrying out luggage from the forest to a small four-wheel-drive vehicle on the side of the road.

“Oh, hi there,” one person said, surprised upon seeing Kino and Hermes.

Kino returned the greeting and cut off Hermes’ engine.

“Are you a traveler? You must have been to that country,” one of the men said. They were resting their hands, sitting on packing boxes placed under the shadows.

“Then, you must have seen it last night?”

Kino nodded. The man continued.

“Our group came from a country in the north to monitor that. Because it is being held on the same day every year.”

“Monitor?” “It’s not a ‘field trip’, is it?” Kino and Hermes asked. The man shook his head.

“It’s for surveillance. Our mission, that is, the military's, is to observe neighboring countries’ movements. ——That country was the most frightening and the most alarming we’ve seen. Year after year, it

spends an exorbitant amount of ammunition for military exercises. You must understand since you’ve seen it with your own eyes.”

“Well, that might be the case...” Kino said so, and gave a small nod.

“They’re definitely a threat. It’s a strong country with massive walls to protect it, in addition to having large amounts of weapons and ammunition in stock.... We can't help but fear the moment when that country comes to attack u. Right now there are no signs of such intent, but we will never let off our guard. That’s why we always come to watch their military exercises."

“I see. Good job, working under this terrible heat.”

The men returned a bitter smile to Hermes’ remark.

“We’re already used to it. ——We’ll be coming next year as well.”

—

Upon parting with the men, Kino and Hermes continued to run along the seemingly endless forest road, in the hot and humid air.

Just as the road was running on the east-west direction , Kino lowered the brim of her hat. Right then, the forest’ s greenery created just the right amount of shade.

“The fireworks were beautiful, weren’t they?” Hermes said, and Kino nodded.

“Yup. As I thought, large-scale ones are really different .”

“That was not normal, you know?”

“Yeah. But since it was so pretty, it’s good one way or another.”

“Oh, well.”

The luggage-laden motorrad ran through the forest dominated by the sound of crickets.

“A Land with an Elder” —I Need You.—

Chapter Four

"A Land With an Elder"

— I Need You. —

There was one country in a rather wide valley of a steep mountainous region.

Its walls were made from stone cut out from the neighboring mountains. Its houses and roads were also made of this stone. These were historic ruins made by some people in ancient times, but later made into a country either by their descendants or by someone else.

Horse-drawn carriages were leisurely coming back and forth the roads, and huge cows pulled plows over the farms. It was a quiet and peaceful country — at least it was supposed to be.

Since olden times, this country elected a person to become its religious and spiritual leader.

This person was called an ‘Elder’.

The Elder was chosen from the common people through an impartial lottery. Afterwards, he would be trained and entrusted with important duties. He would abide by strict laws, serve as an example to the whole country, and work for the sake of all the people.

The current Elder was a man just over fifty years of age. He was chosen shortly before the previous Elder passed away, and carried out his duties excellently for the past twenty years. He had the support and respect of the citizens.

However, this Elder suddenly vanished about half a year ago. Everyone searched for him all over the country, but he cannot be found anywhere. No one had any idea how he managed to disappear from the country.

After a while, a message came from people who called themselves ‘valley bandits’: ‘We abducted your Elder, and we will kill him immediately if you refuse to pay us ransom.' Everyone was surprised.

The Elder after all is an important person, so everyone did as the bandits wished, and presented gold and silver treasures, food, and clothes.

Even so, the bandits did not release the Elder, and demanded more things again and again in exchange for his safety.

The people of the country became more and more distressed.

During this time, a traveler came to the rarely traversed country.

The lone traveler who came riding a battered car was an elegantly-dressed, youthful woman. Inside the holster on her right hip is a high-caliber hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol).

For some reason, she looked strong.

The leaders of the country gathered. Since they had nothing to lose, they decided to give it a try and explained the situation to the traveler. They asked her if she could take on the job of exterminating the bandits.

The woman asked them to tell her the details about the bandits' hideout. Everybody replied that it was located at the top of the valley. It was not possible to approach it from below, nor was it within the aiming range of a rifle from the opposite side of the valley.

The woman pondered for a while, and then asked,

“How much will be my reward?”

—

There was a valley.

The valley formed by the steep and craggy mountains was several hundred meters deep. The river flowing at its bottom looked very thin from above, but the valley itself was two kilometers in width.

There was only one road that leads up to the bends and curves of the valley. A car could barely fit in this road.

Beside this road, at a considerably high part of the valley, several huts were built. There was a big hut and a number of smaller ones. This was the bandits’ hideout.

It was morning in the valley.

A few strips of clouds were floating on the pale blue morning glow of the sky. It was a lovely early summer morning, with the flowers of highland plants damp with the previous night’s dew.

Three guards holding rifle-type persuaders were standing in front of the hideout, while thin smoke from cooking drifted from inside the huts.

A bandit holding a steaming cup came out from a hut. He approached the male guard, and handed him the cup of warm tea.

The guard thanked him. The moment he took the cup, a light shined on the two of them.

The dazzling sun appeared from the lined up mountain peaks behind the opposite side of the valley. The hideout and the valley brightened up in an instant.

The male guard narrowed his eyes, and slightly raised the cup in greeting to the morning sun.

“To a brand new day,” the man said. And then, the man’s body was halved.

His torso exploded and fell sideways to the ground as his internal organs and blood scattered. The tea spilled.

Still confused with what just occurred, the other man’s chest exploded as both his arms and neck fell to the ground.

One second later, the long, low echoes of the two shots rang in the valley.

Another surprised guard soon lost his body. The other one shouted.

“E-enemy raid!”

Those were his last words.

Two men who leaped out of the hut briskly were blown up at the same time.

Someone crouched and yelled as he heard the long and low thunderous echo of the shots.

“A sniper! We are being targeted!”

Bullets rained down on a guard hut at one end of the road. The hut shook as chips of wood were loudly blown off from it, and eventually it crumbled down. All of the people sleeping inside were crushed underneath.

Another small hut was destroyed, its logs clattering and falling off. Several people crouching down in front of it were trundled along to the bottom of the valley.

Bandits holding rifles in their hands came out of the big hut and took cover behind a rock, but were driven into chaos as they did not know where the shots were coming from.

This time the bullets flew towards this rock, reducing it to dust in three shots and blowing the three men hiding behind it to bits.

—

The woman was at the top of the opposite side of the valley.

She was sitting on the ground with her back to the sun and with her legs in front of her. Before her was a thick metallic tripod supporting a persuader the length of one person.

This persuader was originally mounted on top of tanks , meant to shoot down tough targets such as trucks and armored vehicles. Normally, it was not used to shoot down bare humans.

One would ask, ‘Is this actually an astronomical telescope?’ upon seeing the large and thick scope attached on top of the persuader.

The woman peeked through this scope, seeing clearly the bandits moving about in confusion at the other side of the valley.

The woman grasped two rods at the end of the persuader with both of her hands. She aimed with care, and pressed the firing lever by her thumb just once.

Boom-!

A tremendous sound was heard as one bullet was fired off. The persuader shook from the recoil. The barrel

spouted great quantities of gas, blurring the air. If it were not for the water carefully sprinkled on the ground beforehand, the air would have been filled with a great amount of dust. An enormous empty cartridge as big as a flower vase fell to the ground.

A rifle cannot be compared with the massive bullet that tore through the air, glided across the valley and halved a man’s body.

Then, through the eyes of the woman across the scope, the image of a middle-aged man being dragged by the bandits was reflected.

—

“Can’t you see this?! If you continue this any further, we will kill this man!”

Because their voice can’t possibly reach the other side of the valley, the bandits acted out their message. They made the Elder squat on the ground, poked his head with an automatic hand persuader, and then glowered

towards the direction where the shots originated. They could see nothing but the glare of the sun, stunning their eyes.

The Elder’s heavily bearded face registered complete confusion. He only remained squat on his knees with both of his hands raised up.

“We will really shoot!”

The bandit made a number of shooting gestures, poking the Elder's head with the persuader.

The woman could see this scene clearly, but as if to say that it has nothing to do with her, she continued to fire.

Behind the woman, each thunderous shot startled the tethered cow that pulled the heavy equipment up to that place.

“Don’t you get it?! We said we’re going to shoot!”

The bandit yelled as he poked the Elder with his persuader, but the shots kept on coming. A number of people came out of the large hut and died one after

another in their confusion. Even the humans hiding inside the huts were not spared as the huts were shot down.

“Oh no...”

Everything else that was moving except for himself and the Elder were killed. And then one final shot made its way towards the dumbfounded bandit.

—

The Elder, kneeling and with his hands upraised, slowly looked on both sides. The place which was earlier a bandit hideout became a bandit morgue. It looked like the remnants of a ripe tomato throwing festival.

A long time has passed since the last gunshot was heard. The Elder slowly tried to stand up. Then a roar came up as a bullet flew and crushed a rock behind him. The Elder was surprised and sat down again, trembling.

A long time passed.

The Elder slowly tried to lie on his side. This time, the bullet flew to the other side, splitting in half a log which belonged to one of the huts.

“It’s a warning for you not to move. For the time being , it’s best for you to stay as you are.”

The Elder obeyed.

—

The sun rose higher, and the scattered blood on the rocks started to dry up.

As the Elder sat fixedly in the same place, with his face covered in sweat, the sound of a horse’s stride climbing the valley reached his ears. As it came closer, the Elder realized that it was really a horse.

A woman with long black hair alighted from the horse and pulled out a large revolver from the holster on her right thigh.

The woman looked around her for a while, and approached the Elder. She spoke to him.

“You’re the Elder, I suppose? I was hired by your country.”

The Elder looked up at the woman for a while, and his bearded mouth opened and closed.

“I, I was saved...," he managed to say. He nodded several times in response to the woman’s questions.

“As I thought. Elder, there are things I would like to ask, but before that...”

The woman pointed her revolver at a blood-soaked bandit —— a slightly short, handsome young man —— lying about two meters behind the Elder.

“You there, get up," the woman said, and the man opened his eyes wide. He got up, showed that he was not holding anything, and then slowly wiped off the sweat from his face. Then, he raised both of his arms.

“You got me. And here I thought I wouldn’t be exposed...”

“What are you saying? You hid behind the Elder right from the very start,” the woman said.

“Elder, can you stand?” the woman asked. The Elder stood up, and then he picked up the right arm holding the hand persuader which was used to poke his head earlier. He removed the arm...

“T-this bandit! H-how dare you!”

...and aimed it towards the man whose hands were upraised.

“We need at least one person alive as witness. I know how you feel but, please don’t kill him,” the woman said, returning her own revolver in its holster. The Elder did not shoot and lowered his hand. The man just lightly shrugged his shoulders.

“What did everyone in the country tell you about me?” the Elder asked the woman.

The woman answered, “Everyone was very worried about you.”

“Is that so...,” the Elder muttered. Then he suddenly pointed the persuader he was holding towards the

woman. The man with his hands up shrugged once more .

“Those guys were worried? About me? ——Rubbish! Woman! Hands in the air!” the Elder said, his bearded face filled with anger.

“What do you mean? How is that related to you aiming that persuader at me?” The woman asked calmly while raising her hands slightly above her shoulders.

“A big deal! Their intention is for you to take me back and make me work for them again! Because I’m the Elder ! ——What’s an elder for?! Give me a break! They just choose some random person and destroy his peaceful life ! I’m not free to see my family! I can’t even be with my parents at the moment of their death! It’s not me they want! It’s an 'elder’! I refuse to go back to that prison!” The Elder blabbered in one breath. Then he dropped his tone, and coldly,

“That’s why I’m going to kill you and run off somewhere. I was just getting tired of living together with these stupid bandits. I’ll travel somewhere, and start my life over. I have money, as well as a horse.”

“‘Stupid’ is quite a nasty thing to say. Everyone was only following your suggestion, after all.”

“Sorry about that, brother. I am much obliged to you. ——By any chance, do you want to come with me? You can be my subordinate.”

“I’ll reject that offer.”

“Then, I’ll kill you next after this woman,” he grinned.

The man, with his hands still upraised, spoke to the woman whose hands were also in the air.

“Hey, lady with the revolver, what do you think of this man?”

“Uhm, I have various thoughts but——. Now isn’t the right time.”

“Well, that’s true.”

The two looked at the man, and then the woman spoke .

“Elder, there’s one thing I would like to ask you.”

The Elder grinned. "What is it, woman? Begging for your life?"

"Nope. ——How did you get out of that 'prison' without anyone noticing? Everyone in the country finds it a complete mystery."

"Oh, that?" The Elder looked extremely pleased.

"That is very simple. I studied some archaeology as a hobby when I was a student and made a bit of research on the country's structure. I learned from an old man that long ago, the sewers were used by kings as an emergency escape route. No one knows about this anymore, and I used it to escape. As luck will have it, I met these stupid bandits, and everything worked out as planned."

"I see. So it was like that," the woman nodded. The man also congratulated him.

"What a wonderful escape route. Afterwards, it would be best to close it down."

"That's right. You're finally saying some sense," the Elder said and snickered. He pointed the persuader at the woman.

"Now then, you'll have to die. So where should I first shoot at? Your arms? Your legs? Where would be good? Hmm? What do you think?"

The man looked at the exceedingly amused face of the Elder, shook his head a little with an exasperated expression as if to say that he's hopeless.

"Your legs it is!" The Elder spat, aimed at the woman's legs, and pulled the trigger.

Clink.

The clear sound echoed that morning through the valley.

"Eh?"

The Elder pulled once more, and there was another clink.

"Huh?"

"Elder, that thing is not yet loaded y'know. Isn't there a red mark beside the ejection hole? It won't fire. Well——," the man said.

The woman leisurely and slowly pulled out the revolver from her waist, aimed at the Elder who was hastily trying to load his persuader, and fired.

“——It’s already too late.”

—

“Elder, the truth is...” the woman spoke, facing the Elder who fell on his back.

“I received three requests. First, to exterminate the bandits. Second, to discover the trick to your escape. And third, to return to the country and report that you have already been ‘killed’. You were already abandoned by that country’s leaders. However, the citizens were hoping for your safety so they can’t let you die without doing anything to help you. I am to report that you were killed by the bandits, regardless of whether you were really alive or not. It seems that they are going to elect a new elder, tomorrow even. It’s by lottery again.”

“.....”

“And so, you’re free to do as you wish as long as you don’t go back to that country. You can go wherever you want. ——They wanted me to tell you that.”

“.....”

“Isn’t that great! Your heart’s desire was granted at last!” the man said happily, in place of the Elder. The Elder was still lying on his back, both eyes still looking at the sky, his pupils still dilated wide.

Blood was flowing out of his mouth.

—

“Now then,” the woman said, facing the man as she returned the revolver in its holster.

The man was already on his feet, wiping the dried blood of another person from his body with a disgusted expression.

"You weren't a bandit to begin with, right?" the woman said matter-of-factly.

The man scrubbed his bloody hands on his trousers, and then looked at the woman with his handsome face.

"Ah..., I'm beat. How did you know? Will you tell me the reason? Could it be, 'His moves are too good for a bandit,' or maybe, 'His assessment of a crucial situation is topnotch'?"

"About half a year ago, I dropped by a country and saw your wanted poster. ——If I had found you a bit closer to that country, I would have gladly taken your head back with me."

"...Oh, I see."

"My job is to exterminate the bandits. You're free to go anywhere you like."

"I shall take up those kind words. This shall be the end of my easy life pretending as a bandit. Well then."

The man turned his back, but then the woman called out to him.

"However, tell me the location of the treasures you extorted from that country. I'm going to take all of it."

As he heard this, the man looked up to the heavens with an unpleasant expression. He wheeled around, and appealed to the woman with a calm expression.

"Can I take at least half? It's just right since I worked for it, you know."

"All of it."

"How's forty percent? I have the right to at least that much."

"All of it."

"How about thirty-five? Isn't that appropriate enough?"

"All of it."

"It's painful for me, but I'm willing to accept thirty percent."

"All of it."

“Say, twenty percent is my limit——”

“All of it.”

“I can help you carry it, so——”

“Then please carry all of it.”

“Today’s weather is great, isn’t it?”

“Yeah”

“..... How much——”

“All of it.”

“.....”

And then the man closed his eyes and crossed his arms . He thought for a while.

“Uhmm, this is quite an abrupt question but...”

“What is it?”

“Have you ever been called a ‘demon’?”

—

A car was running along a mountain road.

It was a small car in a fairly bad condition, and cannot even be flattered with cleanliness.

The car was running leisurely on the bad road overlooking the bandits’ hideout from afar. In just a while, the sky will be indicating twilight.

The woman who was driving the car saw a man on the supposedly abandoned mountain road.

He was a slightly short, but handsome young man. He was standing beside the road, carrying a simple bag and a rifle on his back. He was facing the car, extending his right arm horizontally with his thumb up.

The car stopped in front of the man. The man approached the car and talked to the woman in the driver’s seat.

“Excuse me, but can I hitch a ride up to a particular place? I can’t possibly walk the distance. I have no money, but I am confident of my skills. Well, I’m no match against a certain someone though.”

The man displayed the hand persuader suspended on his left hip. It was a .22 caliber automatic type with a square barrel.

“I’ve treasured it since I was a kid. This is the only thing I can’t let go of. ——Ah, yes, I can carry your luggage.”

“I don’t need a partner,” she said bluntly and started the car’s gears. The man yelled as he chased after the running car.

“Also! I can fix your persuader! The barrel and the cylinder are already worn out! Its performance has dropped, hasn’t it?”

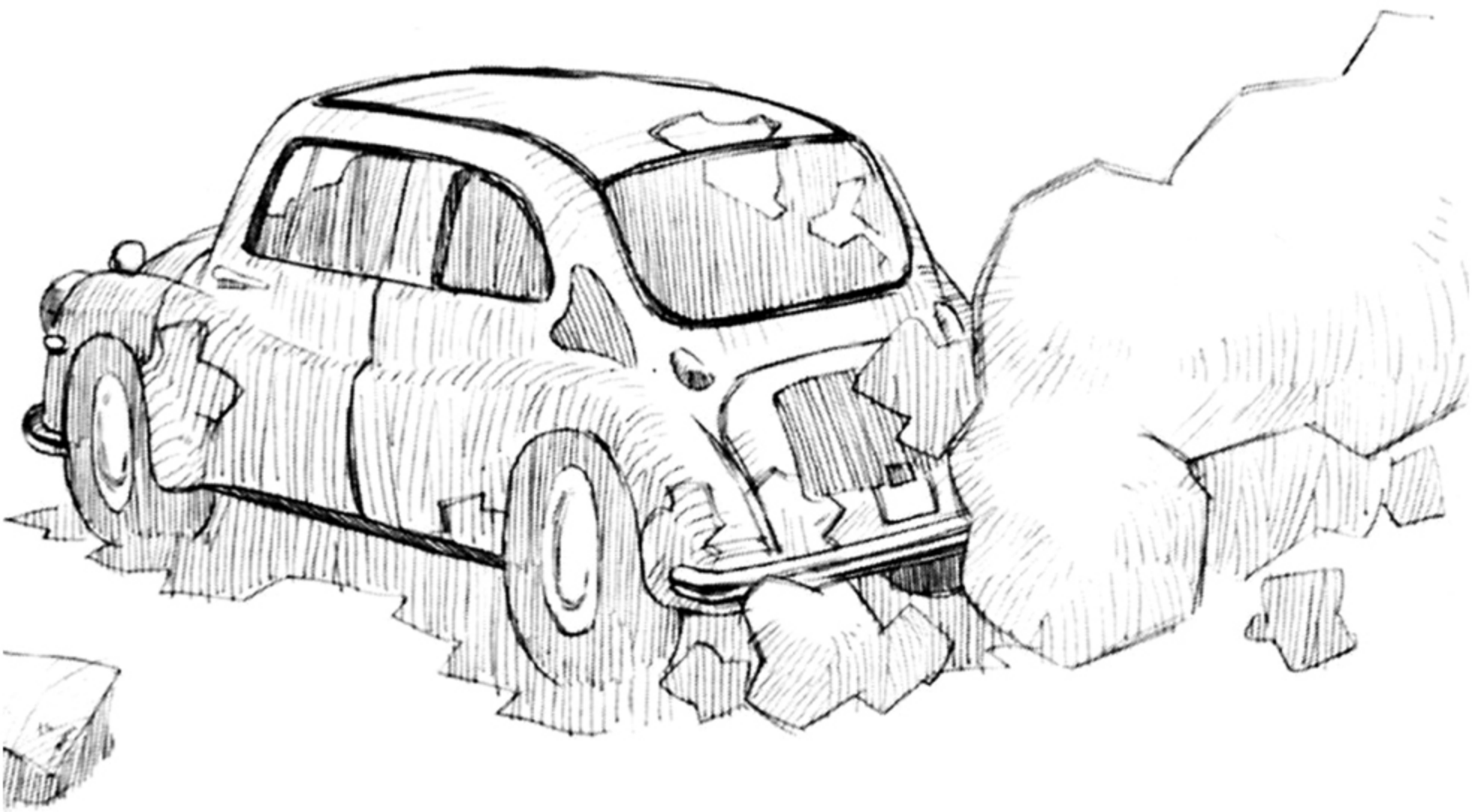
After running for twenty meters, the car stopped. The man caught up with it, and the woman stepped down from the driver’s seat.

“Can you drive?”

“Of course, I can!”

The man tossed his luggage at the back, and sat in the driver’s seat with high spirits.

He waited for the woman to sit on his side, and then set off.



“A Land That Never Forgets” —Not Again—

Chapter Five

"The Land That Never Forgets"

— Not Again —

The forest had been scorched.

The steep slopes of the bump-like mountains of the mountain range stood out. Over there, all of the trees were lined up in straight pillars, the branches of which were blackened from the fire. A number of charcoal pieces were lying about on top of the burnt and hardened ground.

Lead-colored clouds hung above the sky as if matching the dreary scenery. The morning sun which was supposed to be in the sky was nowhere to be found. From time to time, the clouds let one or two drops of rain fall.

There was a road which looked as if it was sewn on the mountainside. The width of the extreme up and down curves of the road could fit only one vehicle. Here and there were muddy puddles of water left on the exposed wet soil.

Running on this road was a single motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly).

A pipe carrier replaced the back seat, on top of which was a big bag. Boxes were attached on both sides of the

rear wheel. A rolled sleeping bag and a brown coat were tied up on top of the bag.

The driver was a young person around mid-teens, wearing a black jacket and a wide belt tightened around the waist. Suspended from her right thigh was a holster for a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol), containing a revolver. She was wearing a brimmed hat covering both of her ears, and goggles strapped around her eyes.

The driver was riding carefully on the muddy road. She stopped at once in front of a big puddle, estimated its depth and passed through it in one breath.

“Hey, Kino.” While running, the motorrad below asked the driver.

The driver called Kino answered, “Hmm?”

"Do you remember how many countries we've visited up to now?”

Kino shook her head. “Nope. What about you, Hermes ?”

“No way—. I asked because I thought you would know,” the motorrad called Hermes answered with a light tone.

Kino spoke, “I remember some of the countries very well. However, it’s impossible to remember all details. Even if I kept a diary, I wonder if it would be any different.”

"Hmm”

“Humans soon forget things which don’t leave them a strong impression. I might have forgotten some countries I’ve gone to, however...”

“However?” Hermes asked.

“Sometimes I think it is wonderful that humans can forget,” Kino answered while passing by a shallow puddle.

“What do you mean?"

“Think of it this way. Because humans can forget unpleasant and painful things, they can go on with their lives without wallowing in despair.”

“Oh, I see."

“Well, that depends on the person. Sometimes remembering bad things can be good.”

“For instance, one knows from experience that tilting too much on a muddy road will result in slipping and falling, right?” Hermes asked.

“Well, I’m sorry.”

Kino’s left leg and left elbow, as well as the left packing box were dirtily caked with mud.

The snake-like mountain road went down to a valley and began to run side-by-side with a stream. The flow of the river was fast, and its water was cloudy.

Kino and Hermes continued to ride, and eventually the mountains ended and the road changed to a smooth and downhill path. Just ahead, a country could be seen.

The country enclosed with walls was built on a small plain in the valley basin. The river from the mountain flowed into the country, where it divided into a number of tributaries.

“At last we’ve arrived. That took some time,” said Hermes, and Kino answered.

“The road was so horrible it made me really tired... I want to relax for three days. I wonder if I can sleep in a hotel here.”

“Since we’ve gotten into so much trouble just trying to reach this place, I hope there are interesting places we can visit. It would be nice if there’s a festival or something.”

“A festival, eh? It would be nice if there’s one.”

Kino and Hermes kept running down the long and gentle slope.

—

“Here. The entry procedures are done. Thank you for waiting.”

The guard in the guard post between the city gates talked to Kino.

“By the way, did you come here in time for the ceremonies?”

“Ceremonies? No.” “What’s that?” Kino and Hermes asked.

“Oh, so you didn’t know. The fact is, today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, exactly during your three-day stay, we will be holding ‘The Great Flood Commemoration Ceremony’. We hold this ceremony on the same days each year, so that we would never forget about the great flood which occurred seven years ago.”

“There was a flood?” Kino asked immediately. The guard nodded with a smile.

"Yes. That was the most terrible flood ever. It was so horrible, that it may be the first and probably the last in this country's history. One week of heavy rains submerged the whole country, panic ensued, buildings were damaged, and casualties emerged. The muddy water did not subside for three whole days, and even after it did, pollution and infectious diseases became

major problems. So that we would never lose those painful memories, we hold this ceremony on the same days, in every corner of the country.”

“I see.”

The guard spoke. "Miss Kino, if you like, you can participate with the residents in the ceremony. You see, all of the citizens are obliged to take part in it.”

Kino passed through the walls while pushing along Hermes, and found themselves in a square.

“Something is going on already.”

A lot of people have gathered. A speech could be heard.

“——And we have survived that horrifying flood. With the memories of the victims in our hearts, we are grateful for the peaceful life we have now, and from here on, this country will rise to greater heights——”

Under the cloudy sky, a man on top of a stage was passionately addressing the people through a loudspeaker. Behind him were several representatives seated on chairs.

“——Never, yes, never shall we be able to forget those events, we vow to continue to live strongly——”

Kino slowly pushed Hermes and approached the congregation.

“——I speak here, safely, and would like to share the joy of the end of this ceremony in the morning at the eastern gate!”

When the warm speech was over, everyone gave silent prayers.

One of the citizens from the dispersing crowd noticed Kino.

After some greetings and self-introductions, this resident began to explain about the terrible flood seven years ago, and how it originated the commemoration ceremony. Almost all of his explanation was the same as the guard’s version, and lasted for a while.

“Look, miss traveler,” another resident showed the tick marks painted on the wall. There were marks high above the person’s head.

“The water reached up there at its highest. Isn’t that tremendous?”

A narrow river was flowing beside the square. A water inlet from the gate guided the water from the outside straight through.

"Normally, that’s a small stream, but that time a large amount of water flowed through it. More and more water came in even after the gates were closed. The rain did not stop. There was nothing we can do.”

Kino looked at the stream and the water inlet.

“Hey, did you see the remaining water level at the gates?” The resident asked. Kino furrowed her brows for a moment, and then quietly shook her head.

—

The whole country was spread over a flat plain.

One-storey houses made of wood were standing side by side along the neat and orderly farmlands. Creeks ran parallel with the roads, and the water drained into the vegetable fields. The embankments were made of ordinary soil, on the surface of which, tiny yellow flowers were blooming.

Kino rode leisurely and headed towards the center of the country. Large buildings were lined up towards the center. Kino found the hotel and entered.

They were guided to a room, where Kino placed Hermes and unloaded the luggage.

Afterwards, Kino climbed up to the roof of the two-storey hotel, where the laundry was being dried.

From there, the wall could be seen very well beyond a number of tall buildings, and beyond it was the basin enclosed by the mountains. Green mountain peaks were lined up downstream to the west, while upstream to the east the peaks were dark brown in color.

"....."

Kino looked at the sky. There, the usual clouds were floating.

“I should probably get back and have some sleep.”

—

In front of the room, a hotel employee spoke to Kino.

“Oh, so you were here. Miss traveler, everyone came out for this noon’s ceremony. We haven’t prepared lunch . If you don’t mind, you can come to the ceremony. A meal will be served there, and you can eat as much as you like.”

And then Kino entered the room.

“Therefore it's decided that I'll go,” she said to Hermes .

“What’s with ‘therefore’?” Hermes said.

—

There was a large park around the center of the country, near the hotel. There were paths and lawns, planted trees and a man-made pond.

In the center of the park was a large concrete platform, at the bottom of which was a statue of people riding on a boat. It was the monument for the great flood commemoration, and lit candles were lined up around it.

The big stage from earlier was placed in front of the monument; a makeshift tent served as its roof and in the middle of it was a podium with a microphone. A flag was hoisted at the center of the park with the words ‘Do not forget that day’ written on it.

A number of people have gathered. All of the chairs in front of the stage were filled. Around them, the heads of people who don’t have seats can be seen. In every corner of the square, tents of food and drinks were lined up, and people were busy moving about in preparation.

"Everyone looks so happy, is this actually a festival?” Hermes said.

Eventually, band members holding their musical instruments gathered beside the stage and sat down on their assigned seats. Various people of all ages climbed on stage, all dressed up. The microphone was tested.

The host went up the stage and proceeded with a lengthy introductory speech. The ceremony has begun.

First, everyone gave short, silent prayers.

And then, the people continued the leader’s oration.

Next, the host introduced and honored the firemen, seated on the prestigious seats in the front row, who were known for their heroic deeds during the time of the flood.

Subsequently, the people on-stage were introduced, and were asked to give a speech one by one. A middle-aged woman ‘touched with the warm feelings of the people in the shelters'; A man who, ‘after losing his job, was encouraged by people under the same

circumstances'; and a schoolteacher who, ‘together with his students, replanted the roadside trees which were swept away during the flood.'

The ceremony continued at length.

“Wake me up when it’s over,” said Hermes, who soon became quiet.

The last speech of a girl was about how, after she lost her father, she was able to continue on with her life thanks to the support of the kind people around her. When she let her father in heaven know that she’s doing well in the form of a letter, the audience came to tears.

“Miss traveler, here take this.”

A piece of paper with lyrics written on it was passed over to Kino, and at the same time,

“Then, so as not to forget that day, let us all sing the ‘ Requiem’. Let us send our feelings to heaven.”

After hearing the host’s voice, the conductor made a bow and swung his baton, and the band started playing.

The chorus sang, and the audience sang together with it.

Kino looked at the lyrics.

"Requiem ~Do Not Forget That Day~"

It was a quiet spring day

It was supposed to be a peaceful spring day

A single drop of rain became gazillion drops, showering the ground

A single day of rain became nine days of rain, showering the country

And we cried, what in the world is happening!

At last, the night of the tenth day came

That time, our homeland was

Chorus:

struck by a muddy stream (struck)

struck by a muddy stream (struck)

Oh, what in the world is happening!

The country was like an ocean, the houses were like islands

The peaceful dining table was suddenly covered with muddy water, the dishes floated, grandfathers drowned

Many people lost their lives, lost their homes, lost their havens

That day, our homes were

(Repeat Chorus)

And that time

Our unity was put to the test (put to the test)

Our courage was put to the test (put to the test)

Finally the water subsided, rivers returned to being rivers, the ground dried up

No matter how much time will pass, we won't forget that day

And so,

We want to tell all of you in heaven:

We won't forget that day

We won't forget (won't forget)

We won't forget (won't forget)

About that day

When the song was finished, there was a big applause, and the ceremony ended.

Some people went home, some stayed to chat, but most people lined up beside the tents giving away food.

Kino slapped Hermes awake, and lined up. During the time of the flood, the people cannot obtain food, and for several days after, food was rationed continuously throughout the country. In order to recreate the event, the people line up to get food, a nearby person told Kino.

"So as not to forget that time, right?"

After lining up for a long time, Kino received her meal. There were two rice balls and boiled soup of vegetables and meat. She sat down beside Hermes and ate.

After the meal, Hermes asked, "What do we do next?"

"We saw the festival," Kino answered. "So we have an opportunity to go out and get the things we need."

Kino went out of the park and headed towards a nearby shopping district. The place was alive with the hustle and bustle of people coming home from the ceremony.

She looked for a store selling clothes, and inquired with the saleslady.

“Do you have a white shirt?”

“What do you think about this?”

Upon saying this, the saleslady showed her a shirt. At the back, the words, ‘Seven years have passed since then: I am proud to have survived that disaster’, were printed in big letters. On the left chest, there was a cute embroidery depicting a submerged house.

“.....”

“It’s a bit more expensive compared to normal shirts, but it’s a very popular souvenir from this country. As to other——”

The saleslady showed a kiddie shirt with the words, ‘ This year I'm taller than the flood's water level in the country’s center.' A hat with ‘If you're old, be proud. You have survived that spring day’s flood.' A coat marked with the street’s water level at the back, and so on.

“Aren’t there any... normal ones?” Kino asked.

“Well, right now these are our best sellers, so we don’t have other items lined up,” The saleslady answered.

Kino gave up on the shirt, headed to a tool shop next, and inquired for the knife inventory. There were only knives with big carvings on the grip, saying ‘7th year anniversary: Spring has come again.'

Without much choice, she then looked for a sharpening stone. One was being sold in a special commemoration pouch. Kino asked for the price of this item.

“That’s too expensive. Don’t you have anything cheaper?”

“Well, it’s because of the anniversary. Isn’t the pouch nice?”

“It’s just stone, right?”

“These are the only stuff we have until the day after tomorrow. But, right now, everyone will gladly buy it.”

“O...kay...”

Without buying anything, Kino went next to the ammunition shop.

Kino asked the male shopkeeper in advance.

“Hey, do you have 7th year anniversary hand persuader bullets? .44 caliber enamel points?” She asked, approaching the back of the shop, and there was a quick reply,

“I’m sorry, miss traveler. We only have normal ones.” The shopkeeper said apologetically.

—

It began to rain soon after she came back to the hotel. The heavy rain fell noisily.

“That was close. We would have been soaked to the skin,” said Hermes.

“.....”

Kino was silent, and looked at the scenery outside.

And then, Kino caught sight of one of the employees, and spoke. "Quite a downpour, huh?"

"Yeah, it's like this every year, during this season. By the way it's odd; until now, the season's rain was scarce, and the river's water had considerably decreased to a good level. With only this much, there can be no floods or landslides."

"I see..."

Upon returning to the room, Hermes asked Kino, "Is something the matter? You seemed thoughtful at times since yesterday."

Kino answered, "I have forgotten..."

"Huh?"

"I feel as if I've forgotten something."

"What 'something'?"

Kino tilted her head. "...What could it be?"

—

The next morning.

As Kino woke up and looked outside, she found that the rain lasted throughoutthe night. It’s almost dawn, but the sky seemed close, and very dark.

After disassembling and cleaning the revolver she called ‘Canon’, Kino proceeded with her quick draw exercises.

The sky has not brightened a bit even after breakfast, and the rain has maintained its strength.

Upon returning to the room, Hermes spoke to Kino. “ Are you planning to relax and rest all day?”

“Yeah.”

In the room, Kino performed a brief maintenance check of Hermes, and inspected her luggage afterwards. She sharpened several knives with an old stone.

Even after finishing this, the rain outside still hasn’t stopped. Kino turned on the radio in the room.

‘——And for this 7th year anniversary, we will be bringing you live until the end the ceremony proceedings scheduled starting lunch. For we will never forget that day——’

“.....”

Kino turned thoughtful once again.

“Did you remember?”

She shook her head in response to Hermes’ question.

“It’s no use. ——For the meantime...”

Kino stood up.

“For the meantime?”

“I’ll go ask if I can eat lunch here.”

Kino left the room.

Kino received her ration right after asking the employees if the food will be distributed for lunch. At the same time , she heard from the weather forecast that the rain will be continuing until the next day.

"This downpour is a good thing. The winter was so dry that the forest fires did not even dissipate.”

“I see.”

Just as Kino turned to go back to her room,

“!”

She turned back to the employee. “When did those forest fires started?”

“Eh? Well, about one month ago. Perhaps, a lightning bolt started the fire, and then it continued to burn for several days. The nights after that were so beautiful. The fires began to burn around the mountain at about the same time we were preparing for the anniversary."

Kino nodded several times, with a quiet expression. “I see...”

—

“Hermes!”

Upon returning to the room, Kino quickly stuffed the biscuits and canned sausages in the bag.

“W-what?”

“We’ll leave now.”

Kino hauled the luggage on Hermes, and tied a folded tarp over it to protect it from the rain.

“Huh?”

Kino took her coat, hat and goggles, fastened her belt, and checked Canon on her right thigh.

“This rain might cause another great flood. Let’s leave this country right away.”

“Eh? Didn’t they say that the rain falls like this every year? Then shouldn't it be okay?” Hermes asked.

“That’s right but, I remember now.”

“Oh, what is it?”

“A woodcutter I met back in Master’s place told me. ‘A burned forest is no longer a forest. Never stay in a valley downstream the forest fire,’ he said. It appears that the force that holds the water in the forest drops. That’s why it’s normal for the water in the river to go down. But, once heavy rain comes down.... I finally remembered. I do not have any evidence, but his place is very low, and I have a somewhat bad feeling, so I want to get out of this country as soon as possible. Do you get it, Hermes?”

“That’s fine, but, what about your three-day rule?”

“What do we do if there’s no more life to protect?”

“I see. So to speak, ‘While there’s life,——’”

“‘——there’s hope.' Let’s go.”

“.....”

Kino checked out of the hotel without giving any particular reason.

Then she wore her hat, strapped her goggles on, closed the collar of her coat, wrapped the bandana around her face, and rode into the rain.

In the furious downpour, Kino headed to the western walls and immediately departed. On the muddy road, she rode without stopping until she reached the western end of the basin.

Once again, they ascended the road away from the river.

Then Kino said, “This area is good. Let’s stop beside this steep slope.”

Before entering the deep mountain valley road, Kino got off the road, and placed Hermes under a thick tree on top of a hill.

She stretched the tarp and rope to make a shelter from the rain. Then she flattened the grass underneath with her foot and assembled her small one-person tent. She placed Hermes beside it.

She put her wet hat and goggles on Hermes. She squeezed the bandana, wiped Hermes' tank, and dried it on Hermes' handle.

Kino leaned on the trunk of the tree and began to eat her lunch. Water droplets hanging from the branch would occasionally drop inside her coat.

"Aaah. ... I hate rainy days."

"My condolences. If you stayed in the country, you will be under a roof, on a bed with white sheets, and a hot shower waiting for you."

"Jeez"

After eating, she sat back and relaxed.

"....."

The visibility was very poor far into the mist. The big water droplets from the tree hit the tarp occasionally.

The rain continued through the night. The rainfall did not wane in strength.

—

The next morning.

As usual, Kino woke up at the crack of dawn.

The rain had stopped. Kino crawled out of the tent, wearing her jacket, and Canon in her right hand.

“Good morning, Kino. It’s great to see that you slept well,” said Hermes.

Kino got out beneath the tarp and stretched her back. “ Yeah. ——It’s great."

She looked at the scenery through the thin morning light.

The basin has spread to the east, to the surrounding walls. The basin has turned into a big swamp. The muddy color has spread over the water's surface.

Gradually, as it became brighter and the sun came out, the country's appearance could be clearly seen. The river coming to the country from the eastern mountain overflowed, as well as its tributaries inside the country. It looked as if the buildings in the middle were floating, and only the roof of the houses could be seen.

"It's a great flood. Do you think it set a new record?"

"Oh dear...," Kino murmured.

"As I thought, perhaps they did not replace the gates since the previous flood. The water intake was the same, but the bank of the river is lower."

"By now, the people of that country may have remembered that flood a long time ago. Or maybe they have forgotten. Which one do you think it is?"

“Who knows?”

She put away the tent and the tarp while taking in the scent of the wet forest.

After finishing her breakfast of portable food, she loaded all of her luggage, and revved Hermes’ engine.

Kino looked up at the lush green mountain.

“Let’s go then. I was told the road here is pretty safe."

“Roger.”

Kino started Hermes off.

She rode off to the west, on the muddy road.

And then, on the seventh curve to the left, she slipped and fell.

While lying down, Hermes got angry.

“I-told-you-! There is very little friction in a muddy road, so you’re not supposed to tilt while riding!”

“My bad, Hermes.”

“Yes. Quickly raise me up, raise me up!”

“Upsy-daisy,” Kino raised up Hermes. Her left leg and left elbow, as well as the left packing box were dirtily caked with mud.

“Jeez. Don’t tell me you’ve completely forgotten?”

"Nope." Kino shook her head While wiping the mud off a nearby tree’s leaves and bark.

“I thought it would go smoothly this time.”

“Is that so?”

Kino started Hermes once more.

“It’s okay,” Kino said while running.

“What is?” Hermes quickly asked in return.

“I think I can pull it off next time.”

“That’s enough.”

“I’ll pull it off for sure.”

“I told you it’s enough.”

“I already got the hang of it. I’ll be able to do it.”

“No, thank you.”

“The rear wheels should flow as well.”

“Not good.”

“The method is to reverse turn the handle——”

“Stop it.”

The motorrad ran through the green forest.

“A Safe Country” —For His Safety—

Chapter Six

"A Safe Country"

— For His Safety —

There was a road bordering the edge of a lake.

The opposite shore of the enormous lake could not be seen, and the horizon seemed endless. The small waves born from the wind were pounding against the stony shore. The road was a reasonable distance away from the lake, on a slightly upraised area where the stone hardened, continuing to some unknown place.

Tall forests sprouted across the land, and could be seen well under the light of the clear morning. There were no more traces of snow.

Along the road were several points that intersect with a river. Surmounting the road, the cold water of the broad and shallow river blended into the lake.

Near this river, inside the forest a bit ways off the road , a single motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) was parked. There was a human beside it.

The person was around mid-teens, with short black hair, and big eyes carrying an intrepid expression.

She was wearing a black jacket with a wide belt fastened around the waist. Several pouches were attached on the belt. On her right thigh and at the back of her waist were holsters for hand persuaders (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol). The one on her right thigh was a revolver-type. The one behind her waist with its grip up, was a slim automatic-type.

She pulled out the revolver from her right thigh and fired at waist height. It made a tremendous sound, and a white smoke drifted from it. The bullet hit an iron plate which looked like a chopping board, suspended from a tree far away. The birds flew away at once.

"Hit," said the motorrad. The human had a slightly satisfied look on her face. This time she stretched her right hand out a bit and fired five shots in quick succession. The iron plate swung and danced as all of the bullets hit it.

"Your skills are as good as ever, Kino. Good job," said the motorrad. The human called Kino thanked him, and the motorrad spoke again in return.

"Well, shouldn't we be leaving soon?"

“Nope. Just a bit more.”

While saying so, Kino disassembled the persuader and replaced the emptied cylinder. She reassembled it back and returned it to the holster.

Kino walked up to the iron plate, and hung it again on a tree twice as far.

She walked back up to the motorrad. She pulled the persuader behind her waist with her left hand. She reached for and released the safety and aimed at the iron plate.

“Hermes, I'm in your hands.”

“Leave it to me,” the motorrad called Hermes replied. Kino fired. The gunshot was quieter than before, and the small empty cartridge flied out.

“Hit. Right in the middle,” said Hermes. Another shot was fired.

“Hit. A bit to the lower left.”

For each one of Kino’s shots, Hermes reported where the bullet hit.

Kino fired off the rest of the second magazine, put in a third one and locked the safety. She returned it to the holster and went to retrieve the iron plate.

“Superb. Master would've been satisfied," said Hermes when Kino returned.

"Yup, thanks. That’s enough practice for today.”

Kino removed the cotton stuffed in both of her ears, put them away in her pocket, and picked up all of the scattered empty cartridges. She then turned on Hermes’ engine. The engine’s sound echoed through the lake.

Kino put the iron plate in a bag lying beside Hermes. She stowed the bag on Hermes’ rear carrier, and secured it firmly with a rubber strap.

“By the way, Kino. Is the country we’re going to next that dangerous? You were practicing a lot since yesterday.”

“Huh? I don't know.”

"Don't know?"

“The truth is I don’t have an idea. I have too little information, see. But I should always be prepared. It might be similar to the last country we've visited. ...Well, shall we go?”

Kino finished loading the luggage, and checked if she left anything behind.

She put on her long brown coat and wrapped the long hem up to her thighs. She wore her hat whose flaps covered her ears, and strapped her goggles on.

She sat on Hermes and released the kickstand.

Kino launched Hermes off and returned to the road from the forest, riding with the sun behind them.

—

It was about noon when they arrived at a country facing the lake.

“Hello, miss traveler. Welcome to our country.”

Outside the country’s walls, on the window counter by the gate, the immigration inspector greeted the traveler who came riding a motorrad.

“Hi. I’m Kino and this here is Hermes. We would like to enter this country for sightseeing and recreation. We are hoping for a three-day stay.”

As Kino said this, the inspector looked at Hermes and asked.

“Uhm, that motorrad, Mr. Hermes, will also be staying in the country?”

“Of course,” Hermes said and Kino nodded. The inspector looked worried for a moment, and then spoke.

“Uhm, this is hard to say, but, please do not be offended.... The thing is, if the driver Miss Kino here does not agree to sign a pledge saying that Mr. Hermes’ engine will not be used, we cannot allow Mr. Hermes to enter the country. You see, in this country, driving a motorrad is prohibited by law.”

“Driving is prohibited?”

“Huh? Then how do we move about then?” Hermes asked from behind.

“We have a completely safe and free unattended public transportation system. It’s like a car, but it’s free of charge and can be instructed to go anywhere you like. There’s enough space for Mr. Hermes to ride in, so you don’t have to worry about transportation. If you can promise not to start the engine, just that...”

Kino thought for a while. “I understand. I promise not to ride.”

“Kino?”

“It can’t be helped, Hermes. ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do.'” Kino said, and Hermes spoke in a somewhat convinced tone.

“I understand. ——Well, compared to that other country where you were forced to wear weird clothes, this is *way* better.”

“... I don’t want to recall that,” murmured Kino.

“Thank you very much. Then please sign the pledge in these documents.”

The inspector happily held out the documents to Kino, as well as the writing instrument he was holding. It was a fine brush. Kino made a strange face for a moment.

“Ah, this is what we use in our country. The ink is over here.”

“Sure...”

Kino somehow managed to sign the documents, promising that she would not turn on Hermes’ engine while in the country. The inspector checked it.

“Okay. Thank you very much. We will prepare the gates immediately. Ah, do you happen to have any persuader with you?”

“I do,” Kino said, and took out from beneath her coat the revolver-type, grasping it by the barrel, its grip up. Kino called this 'Canon'. The other one on her back was called 'Woodsman'.

As Kino raised her face, the inspector suddenly jumped from his seat and fled to the far end of the room with the window. He hid behind a locker and timidly looked at Kino and the persuader.

“Th-that too..., is not allowed to be brought in our country,” he said from a distance.

“Eh?”

“Y-you see, in our country, civilian possession of persuaders is completely prohibited by law. In this country, only the members of the national defense force have persuaders. If you insist on taking it with you, it’s a pity, but, we cannot allow you to enter the country. Please understand.”

The inspector, which looked more apologetic than before, explained from afar.

“Now, Kino. What will you do?”

“That’s really a problem. I’ll have to go unarmed?”

Kino looked at 'Canon' in her hand with a really troubled expression on her face. Hermes spoke.

“‘Romans’, ‘Romans’, ‘Romans’.”

“Fine...,” muttered Kino. She went towards the inspector, and held out ‘Canon’.

“I understand. There’s no other way, right? And I've got one more. Will you please take care of these until we leave?”

“No, that’s impossible! ——Ah, I’m sorry. I’m afraid of persuaders. Ah, please do not show it to me! Eeek——”

The inspector completely hid himself behind the locker .

—

In the end, Kino disassembled all of her persuaders and put them in a safety deposit box provided by the inspector. It was decided that the box would be sent to the western gate and would be kept there for the meantime, until Kino’s departure.

The inspector then processed the documents. It took a while before the task was finished.

And then the inspector spoke. “Well, sorry for the wait . We’ll be opening the gate.... Ah! Uhm, do you have a knife, by any chance? In our country, civilian possession of knives is exclusively prohibited by law——”

Kino nodded several times without changing her expression.

“Yes, I have. I have *lots*. ... Excuse me, but can you tell me what else is prohibited in this country?”

—

"Finally,” Kino said upon passing through the gate.

“I’m so tired,” Hermes said while being pushed by Kino.

The documents were furnished after she surrendered all of her knives. The inspector told Kino which of her

other belongings were prohibited by law. In the end, Kino wasn't able to take her cutlery along with sharpening tools, and for some unclear reason, even the rope used in stretching a tent.

The sun was setting beautifully when Kino entered the country.

The inside of the walls was spacious, and many one-storey buildings were built at regular intervals. The completely paved roads were wide and in good condition. Since it was evening, there were not much people around.

Kino took off the coat she was wearing and placed it on top of the luggage. And then she muttered while looking at the now empty holster in her right thigh.

"Was my diet successful? My body feels so light. Oh, well..."

Kino looked at the road. After a while, a running car stopped silently right in front of Kino and Hermes. Several seats were lined up inside it, but nobody was aboard.

A voice saying 'Please come aboard' was heard from the car as the door slid open. Some of the seats folded and became a flat loading platform. The car lowered down until the loading platform was on the same level as the road surface.

"It's 'unattended' alright," Hermes said. Similar cars run about now and then. Kino understood, lifted Hermes onto the platform, and sat on one of the chairs.

'Where are we going?' the voice came, and Kino gave a loud order to head to the hotel.

'Understood,' came a reply, and the car began to run. It was very slow, about the speed of a running person.

Hermes spoke. "I see. This way, it's like you were just running on your own."

"Easy is easy," Kino said while sitting comfortably on the chair.

After Kino and Hermes arrived to the hotel, they received a typical welcoming greeting and were guided to their room.

The room was spacious, but it was strange. There were several furniture items, but all were very low. Whether it's the bed, the closet, the washstand, or the desk, nothing was over knee-height. There was no bathtub in the bathroom.

"I want to go sightseeing but I've had enough for today."

Kino ate her meal, took a shower, and went to sleep.

—

The next day.

Kino got up at dawn. The weather was not bad.

She loosened up her body with light exercise, and was about to train with her persuaders, when she remembered that all of them were in safekeeping.

Reluctantly, she trained her combat skills more than usual.

She ate her breakfast and woke up Hermes after a while.

Kino’s body still felt light as she pushed Hermes out of the hotel. She was wearing her jacket, and the coat was rolled and securely tied on the carrier.

Several people were lined up out in the road. Kino was told that it could be relatively crowded in the mornings, and sometimes people have to wait in line for the cars.

Kino pushed Hermes and joined the queue. Then up front, a woman in her late-twenties spoke to Kino.

“Good morning. Are you a traveler?”

“Yeah. Good morning,” Kino returned the greeting, and the woman who was looking at Kino’s right thigh spoke with a slightly surprised face.

“Hey. Is that, by any chance, a persuader holster? I often see it in movies.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right. However, all of my persuaders were locked up in a safety deposit box at the gate.”

The woman’s expression slightly darkened.

“You use a persuader, don't you?”

“Yup,” Kino nodded. The woman’s expression hardened, and then she spoke slowly.

“Hey, listen well. In this country, civilian possession of persuaders is completely prohibited by law.”

“So I heard.”

“Do you know why?”

To the woman’s question, Kino answered with, “No. I still haven’t heard this country’s history yet.”

And the woman said firmly while shaking her head,

“No, it has nothing to do with history at all. It’s simply because persuaders are very dangerous.”

Kino glanced at Hermes, and spoke to the woman.

“Dangerous, is it?” was her small response. The woman continued to talk as if lecturing a student.

“Yes. Persuaders are made for the sole purpose of shooting people and other living things. That’s why a

person with a persuader will want to shoot other people. And they will get hurt. If everyone has a persuader, then everyone will want to shoot someone. Then as soon as tomorrow comes, there will be crimes involving persuaders here and there. Surely, there will be no such misfortunes if there were no persuaders. The truth is, people will be able to live happily, if only there were no weapons that can kill. ——Persuaders are very dangerous. Human lives are put in danger just because such a thing exists. That’s why in this country it is totally prohibited by law. Persuaders won’t do you any good, you know.”

Kino listened, nodding lightly. And then she spoke.

“In my case, there are unexpected situations I encounter during my travels, in which case, a persuader comes in handy.”

The woman’s expression remained dark.

“And probably in such times, you end up using persuader. You see, if both of you are holding persuaders , then your dispute will continue until either of you is dead. But, if you don’t have a persuader, your opponent will not think of killing you — because that is just so

cruel. Also, there will be a chance for discussion. You will begin to explore more peaceful methods of resolving your differences."

“It's like that, huh?” was Kino’s half-hearted reply, and the woman spoke with a dignified and unworried face.

“You coming to this country might be a coincidence, but think of it as a very good opportunity. Please do take time to learn this country’s wonderful concept of safety. Bye.”

While looking at the woman going away by car,

“I will,” Kino said indifferently.

Kino rode in a car and immediately ordered it to go to the country’s center. The display in front of the car flashed ‘To the country’s center’ and went off.

The car was running slowly just as before. They come to a complete stop in every intersection, and then pass through it in the same order they came in. No matter where it was moving, it maintained a reasonable distance from the other cars.

“This is so boring—. I’m going to fall asleep,” Hermes complained as the car stopped beside the road. The recording asked them to let in another passenger.

A middle-aged man, waiting in queue, went on board.

"Oh, how rare. It’s a traveler. Good morning.”

The man sat opposite Kino.

“Good morning.”

“How do you find riding our completely safe and free unattended public transportation system?”

“It certainly is comfortable and easy,” Kino said, and the man nodded approvingly.

“Right, right. This is one of our country’s prides. Thanks to it, anybody can go anywhere, in a safe, easy, and efficient manner. It is a must-have in a wide country such as ours.”

“Can this vehicle be driven on your own?” Kino asked casually. The man suddenly frowned.

“Drive? ——Did you just say ‘drive’? By that, do you mean to move this car by yourself?”

“Yes. I was wondering if there were people who wanted to drive it on their own. To go to the places they want to go to on their own.”

As Kino said this, the man’s face changed color.

“Driving is dangerous! For a human to operate a car.... That is such a dangerous thing!”

“Really?”

“Of course. A car has a large mass and runs at a high speed. That energy is comparable to that of a persuader bullet. You must imagine what would happen if you bump into a person?”

“Well, I guess so.”

“Humans aren't perfect living things. We make mistakes. There are some who think it’s fine if it’s just one person. ——But, mistakes will not be caused if there aren’t any people to commit them in the first place. And that is true for driving cars. Once we allow people to drive, for sure, someone somewhere will get into a car accident. Someone or something will get hurt, or killed even. That’s why in our country, driving of vehicles by civilians is completely prohibited by law. An era where people are allowed to drive vehicles is a barbaric one. Now you can automatically go to your destination safely, and with just one command, so thinking of driving a vehicle on your own..., just what are you thinking? Ah, that was rude of me. I’ve said too much. But, driving is... ”

The man stopped the car and stood up.

“Miss traveler, please do not ever think of driving this thing on your own.”

The man who was about to get off left those words in a loud voice. Then a very old man came aboard and sat across Kino.

The car moved, and while looking out the window, the old man suddenly began to himself.

“Ah, driving.... Such a nostalgic word. When I was still young, you can sit behind the wheel and step on the accelerator pedal. However, during that time, tragic accidents that happen day in and day out were always taken for granted. In fact an uncle of mine got hit by a car while crossing a road, and was dead the next day. He was young, had a wife and kids. There were a lot of other tragic accidents; inexperienced youths driving too fast, failing to overtake a curve and running over a column of kindergartners, truck drivers looking away for a bit and crushing a car in front of them, and so on. Those people who make mistakes are no different from animals. For instance, even though there were firm rules and trafic signals, the people who created them couldn't obey the rules themselves. The vehicles can also be used for crimes. Criminals escaping by car compromise the safety of all the people around them."

“I see,” Kino nodded suitably.

"A car is a tool for killing people. It is a truly frightening murder weapon. People had to be refrained from using cars. But now we can move about using these

machines without a single risk. This is how it should have been right from the start. Ah, people would have lived longer.”

The old man was still gazing into the distance, speaking to himself.

—

Identical one-storey buildings were lined up at the center of the country. The streets were clean and well-maintained.

“Who said that this will be interesting? THese are just boring buildings,” Hermes complained.

“Where should we go this time?” Kino said, and as she began to push Hermes,

“You! Hey you there, wait!”

A voice raised from behind. It was a high-pitched female voice.

Kino turned around. A rather portly, middle-aged lady rushed wildly as she beckoned to Kino, and somehow managed to stop in front of her.

"I thought she was about to knock you down," Hermes said in a small voice.

"By any chance, do you travel with this?"

The lady pointed her finger at Hermes, still in her high-pitched voice.

"Yeah. But here I'm not allowed to start the engi——"

"No way! Such a dangerous thing!"

The lady's voice drowned Kino's remark.

"I——"

"Motorrads are dangerous! Do you get it? Just think about it! Your body in such an unprotected state, in such a speed, just what do you think will happen if you fall down? You don't have anything to protect body with!"

"That's——"

“You! Life is very important! It’s a precious thing! So please stop riding motorrads! You cannot have your life back when you get in an accident! Don’t try risking your young life with riding something like a motorrad. Please stop while it’s not yet too late. Do you get it? Think of the sorrow you will cause your parents if you have an accident!”

“Yeah, but my——”

“It’s good that you understand! I just shared my concern for your safety! I hope you learn various things from this country. Bye.”

The lady rushed once more, and boarded a car.

After a while, Hermes spoke.

“Wow. This country might be more troublesome than we thought.”

Kino nodded.

“Now let’s go see the shops.”

Kino and Hermes rode a car and went to the shopping district.

In the middle of a large building was a passage, on both sides of which many stores were lined up. Kino walked through the passage, pushing Hermes along.

Kino found a hardware store and went inside. The interior was spacious, and pots were placed on a low shelf. She was greeted by a shopkeeper in his mid-thirties , sitting on the floor, working.

“Welcome, traveler. What would you be looking for?”

“Yes. I’m looking for a knife. One with a sharp, double-edged blade, longer than the palm of my hand. I couldn't find one anywhere.”

“What are you saying? Ah, didn't you know? In this country, bladed objects are completely prohibited by law. ”

"Eh? It’s not available anywhere? At all? What about in other shops?” Hermes asked rather deliberately.

“Of course you won’t find any. Possession of bladed objects by civilians is strictly prohibited by law.”

“Why is that?” Kino asked the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper responded immediately.

“Why of course, it’s because bladed objects are dangerous, isn’t it?”

“Is that so?”

“Yes it is! Bladed objects are tools made for the sake of cutting and hurting people. People who want to have knives are people who do not know the value of life. They are a reserve army of murderers. We cannot allow such people to handle bladed objects. Societies which deem bladed objects as necessary for the lives of its citizens are indecent. This country’s excellent rules and regulations against knives are just so wonderful I can’t control my tears from flowing!”

The shopkeeper’s eyes blurred as he said this, and Kino asked.

“But, what do you use to sharpen pencils?”

“We use pencil sharpeners!” The shopkeeper immediately replied. Kino asked once more.

“But what about handicrafts? Ah, and cooking too.”

“Materials and food ingredients that are being sold here are already cut properly. After all, this is not a rural area. We have thoroughly trained professionals who do the cutting in, say, the butcher and fish shops. They are the only ones who need bladed objects as tools. Even these pros are not allowed to use the tools outside the workplace. The tools are stored properly in a safety deposit box. Knives in circulation among the general public.... Just the thought of it scares me. If ——”

Kino and Hermes waited for the next words of the shopkeeper.

“—— If such a country exists, then in that country, there must be frequent street killings using knives, right? If a desperate human were to obtain a kitchen knife from just any store, clutching it with both hands and slashing randomly at innocent bystanders in a street they thought safe and peaceful! ... Ah, it’s horrible to imagine. I’d hate

to live in a country like that. Ah, so terrifying.... Scary.... Too frightening...”

“I see. I understand what you're saying. If you’ll excuse us.”

“Thanks.”

Kino and Hermes left the shop, with the shopkeeper holding his head in anguish.

Eventually, they walked through the shopping district devoid of people. After a little while, Kino muttered, “ Nothing at all, huh?”

Hermes then spoke with a serious tone to Kino who seemed lost in wonder.

“I can understand a little how you feel. A long time ago, there was also a crazy guy who tried to kill Kino with a kitchen knife. ——A ‘devil out-of-place’, so to speak.”

"...‘Crazy guy with a blade’, you mean?” [12]

“Yeah, that.” Upon saying so, Hermes fell silent for a while.

And then pulled himself together, “Now, what will we do?”

“... Then let’s finish shopping for things that we really need,” Kino said while looking around.

“Kino. Didn’t you say that the strap of the bag came off?”

“Oh, that’s right. I need some strong glue.”

—

Kino approached some people and asked for the location of the general store.

As expected, the store she went into had low shelves. A middle-aged man who seemed to be the store manager greeted her.

"Welcome. Oh, a traveler, isn’t it? Welcome to our country, and welcome to my store. Are you looking for anything in particular?”

“Hello. Do you have instant glue, or anything similar? ”

The store manager was slightly surprised, and immediately said carelessly.

“None. Is there a reason for something like that to exist ?”

“None?” Hermes said, and the store manager put up his finger.

“This is a good chance to tell you. Ah—, ehem. In our country, civilian possession and use of instant glue is strictly prohibited by law.”

“..... Uh-huh, how come?” Kino asked, and Hermes murmured that she must have an idea why.

“Of course, it’s because instant glue is dangerous. See, what will you do if you cannot take it off from your finger? What if it gets in your eyes? What if a child

swallows it? In all cases, the damage will be irreparable. Things that bring danger to the public have to be regulated by law. For that reason, if you want to have something repaired, you can use the glue we have right here.”

The store manager held out a glue in a colorful tube. Kino took it and examined it for a while.

“How long does this thing take to dry?”

“It’s fast. It takes only half a day.”

“.....”

Kino returned the glue on top of the low desk.

“I’m sorry, but I think I’ll pass on the glue. Instead, do you have a strong thread and a big-eyed needle suitable for sewing leather?”

To Kino’s question, the store manager answered with, “We have threads, but only thin ones. By the way, all objects with tensile force above ten years are prohibited by law.”

“What do you mean by ‘tensile force above ten years’? ” Kino asked, and the store manager explained.

“In this country, the weight of a typical ten-year old should break a string within three seconds.”

“And why is it prohibited?” Hermes asked.

“Isn't it obvious? It is to prevent suicide by hanging and death by strangulation. A tough string is a murder weapon, see.”

“.....” “That’s the reason why they did not allow the rope.” Kino fell silent, and Hermes muttered.

“The shelf of yellow threads is over there. But we don’t have needles. Possession of needles by the public is prohibited by law.”

Kino nodded. “It’s probably dangerous because it can be used to stab. There is also the risk of the tip of the needle going to the lungs through the blood vessels.”

“Exactly. Oh, didn’t you know? Public possession of needles and other similarly pointed objects is completely prohibited by law. Compass tips and ball pen points

should be the same sort as a fountain pen’s. Pencils whose tips are within 120 degrees are illegal, too.”

“.....”

“However, needles are attached to sewing machines, and in such cases only the suppliers are allowed to remove the needles for each unit used. Possession of a sewing machine requires a license and for your current address to be listed, in order to identify each person to whom a unit has been sold. If your criminal record is clear, the product will be delivered within two weeks. After that, you will have to go to the police station to register the serial number of the needle.”

“Wha—. That’s so troublesome.” Hermes said in a disgusted tone.

“That is in order to establish the public's safety,” the manager said proudly. Kino asked.

“The sewing machines are allowed?”

“Yes. Possession of the sewing machine itself is allowed and anyone can have it. You just have to submit a resumé to the nearest police station, to prove that there are no problems with your medical certificate and that

you have no prior criminal record. There’s a written test, and a practical test after a training course on the operation of an actual sewing machine. Once you pass these exams, you can have your permit to purchase a sewing machine and go straight to a shop to buy one. Once you buy the machine, you will have to go to the police station again to register the main body of the sewing machine. Then you will be required to have a locker and a key to store the sewing machine at home. You have to make sure that the locker can be secured somewhere in your house. If you have a family, you will also need to submit medical certificates and written consent from all of them. Then you will be able to use the sewing machine installed in your home. You can make anything you like, whether it be children's clothing or rag skirts. Then once a year, the police will come to check that the needle has not been removed or modified, and your registration will be updated. I have a study manual for sewing machine operations. Do you want one?”

As the store manager said this, he took out a book as thick as an encyclopedia from under his feet.

“No, thank you.... Excuse us for disturbing you.”

—

After lunch, Kino came to the lake shore. The sun was at its highest, and the lake was transparent and blue under it. Several streaks of clouds were visible on the horizon.

Kino stopped Hermes on the lawn and she squatted down.

“Hey there, miss traveler.”

A voice came from behind. Kino looked back, and a man took three steps towards her. He was around thirty, wearing glasses, and was wearing white clothes like that of a researcher.

“Hello. This is such a beautiful lake.” As Kino said this , the man laughed heartily.

“Isn’t it? Our ancestors chose this land because they wanted to have this view. In midsummer, this sandy beach gets filled with people who come to play.”

“Oh. You can swim here during the summer?” Kino asked happily. At the same time, the expression of the

man darkened. He came two steps closer to Kino and in a cold tone different from earlier,

“Swimming? How ridiculous. Swimming is prohibited by law.”

“Prohibited?”

“Yes. I’m sure you don’t understand how terrifying water could be. Don’t you know? Humans can drown in shin-deep water."

“But, swimming is fun,” Kino said, and the man sighed and took a big breath. He lifted his finger up and shook his head lightly.

“Fun..., huh. That ephemeral desire for pleasure results in an endless number of tragic deaths anywhere. The horrors of water-related accidents are taken too lightly. Anyway, in this country, citizens are prohibited to swim — whether in the river or in the lake. Well, if you are a little more aware of the value of life, you wouldn’t think of such a thing. But if you still want to swim no matter what, go ahead. I won’t stop you from committing suicide.”

“O...kay...”

After her half-hearted reply, “Oh! ——By any chance, are bathtubs banned for the same reason?”

“That’s right. Those used for infants are a special case, and require permission to be used, but other than that, all other equipment similar to bathtubs are strictly prohibited. There is always the risk of small children and old people dying from drowning. I have heard stories of countries having such a dangerous thing installed in their homes. But if people from those countries were to come here, they will realize how immature their culture is. I want them to come and learn how real advanced countries do things.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes. That’s why travelers are in luck. You can share our country’s splendid ways to your own country once you go home. You can tell everything you’ve seen here without hesitation. I’m sure everyone will be surprised. By the way, motorrads are really dangerous, so you’d better stop riding them. Bye.”

The man walked away, and Hermes asked, “Now what? Are we going back to the hotel?”

“It's also nice to take a nap here."

“Isn’t it a bit chilly? You’ll catch a cold.”

“I see.... So taking a nap is also dangerous.”

—

In the hotel lobby low shelves and expectedly low sofas were lined up.

A circular water tank was affixed on top of the shelf. Its upper portion was spread out in folds, and has the shape like that of a fat tulip.

A number of goldfish were swimming inside. There were red and white speckled types, as well as weird ones with bulging eyes.

Kino was squatting to look at the aquarium, and then a hotel boy who happened to pass by spoke.

“Aren’t they cute? These are the pets this hotel is so proud of. Right now, goldfish are the most popular pets in this country.”

And then he pointed at the type with bulging eyes.

“We have a shortage of this particular type, and breeders are reaping a profit from them.”

“Eh. Aren’t there any other pets around? For instance, dogs,” Kino asked. The boy was slightly surprised, and then with a calm tone,

“There are no dogs here. In our country, keeping a dog is prohibited by law.”

“Prohibited, is it?” Kino asked as she stood up.

“Yes. What would you do if you get bitten by those scary teeth? A human will have a serious injury in no time. In the worst case, you might even get killed. I can’t imagine a world where such dangerous animals like dogs aren’t prohibited. It’s common sense. Only animals which can do absolutely no harm to humans can be kept as pets.”

“That is to say, only the ones allowed by law can be kept as pets?”

The boy nodded, then said afterwards, "Goldfish, small fish, and adult fish not exceeding twenty centimeters, as well as sea monkeys [13]—— have you heard of those? Then later on, freshwater jellyfish were also allowed. They’re all cute."

“Is that all? What about carp?”

“Carp? Carps are dangerous. You’ll have to have a pond built to keep some. What would happen if a child falls into it?”

“What about cats?” Hermes asked.

“Why of course, cats are no good either. If you were scratched by those claws and catch tetanus what would you do?”

"And small birds?” Kino asked.

“They were allowed until three years ago. But people found out that dust from the feathers entering your windpipe is bad, and since then they have been completely regulated. Those who have been keeping

them as pets at the time were required to surrender them ."

“Turtles?” Hermes asked.

“Anything with bite force exceeding 0.5 pencil is not allowed. Such as snapping turtles.”

“What do you mean by ‘0.5 pencil’?”

“It’s a measurement of bite force. One pencil is the force required to break a pencil in one minute. That means, if a bite can break a pencil within thirty seconds, it is not allowed.”

“What a stringent check,” Hermes said.

The boy expanded his chest, and said proudly, “All of these are for the safety of human lives,” he said with a radiant smile.

Kino called out to the boy who was about to leave.

“I have one more question. Why is it that the shelves are low anywhere you go?”

"Because it’s dangerous if an object falls from a high place. In this country, the maximum height for a shelf is the average height of a baby that can walk. Building shelves higher than that is prohibited by law. That’s why the rooms are very spacious. Thanks to this law, there are absolutely zero human casualties due to falling objects. The country guarantees the safety of its citizens. Oh, that’s it!”

The boy pointed to a corner of the lobby, where a low bookshelf lined from end to end with thick books was placed. There were about fifty books.

“Over there are this year’s latest editions of our law books. If you so wish, you can read them and make them as a reference for your own country’s laws. We wouldn’t mind at all.”

—

The next day.

As usual, Kino got up at the crack of dawn. She moved her body a bit to relax.

She quickly ate her breakfast, tapped Hermes awake and departed immediately to avoid the morning rush. As there were no other customers in the car, it was a bit shaky for a while until they arrived at the western gate.

The young inspector in his twenties was waiting by the window in the outer walls. Kino saw him and the carriage containing the deposit box right next to him.

"Here. We are grateful for your cooperation."

Kino first placed the small objects in her bag. Then, she put the knives back in place. The inspector looked on curiously.

Kino took out the pieces of her persuaders, and quickly reassembled them. The inspector who did not run away this time, was gazing at her work.

She then returned 'Canon' and 'Woodsman' in their holsters. Kino jumped lightly as if confirming the weight.

"As I thought, I feel calmer. It feels as if I lost an arm and it grew back," Kino said.

The inspector who was silently looking on from the beginning then talked to Kino.

“Hey, miss traveler. Just for a moment. I want to talk to you. ——There’s something I want you to listen to.”

“What is it?” Kino turned around and asked. The young inspector hesitated for a bit.

“I have not told this to anyone else in the country but... . Having this sort of job, I often have a chance to speak to travelers like you. It might be that..., the way of thinking of everyone in this country, that is, regulating everything that is considered dangerous, is somewhat wrong. I’ve been feeling this way for some time...”

“What do you mean? Kino asked. The inspector spoke slowly, in a cautious tone.

“... It’s just that, motorrads, knives, persuaders, cars, instant glue; these are mere ‘objects’.... I don’t know how to say it. I have a feeling that, it depends on the people who uses it, that is to say, a thing becomes either dangerous or not, depending on the way we use it. In other words...”

“Please continue,” Kino said. The inspector looked ahead of Kino.

“In other words, I'm starting to wonder whether the real danger comes from humans. To be precise, human will. It doesn’t mean that things which are considered dangerous and can potentially hurt people are objects that have a will to move freely and attack humans. I think it’s more like somebody used it to intentionally hurt people, or due to lack of knowledge and experience, used it far from its purpose and hurt himself and others as a result. There’s no such thing as a ‘dangerous object’, rather, there are only ‘dangerous humans’, don’t you think? Wouldn't it be better to have people who are well-trained in the correct way of using these objects, as well as in the morals and rules of using them? Instead of not letting people have a dangerous object, shouldn’t we just nurture people that are able to recognize the risks of using them? We ought to increase the number of such people. And I feel that if such people were to acquire the skill to use these various things properly, they will find these objects as more convenient or more fun to use. And I think that there’s a potential for life to be more fulfilling and enjoyable. Of course, there’s always the risk. But if we put them in a balance, I think the potentials would outweigh the risks way way more.”

And then the inspector shook his head, confirming that nobody was around. Even so, with a considerably small voice, he asked Kino.

"Hey, miss traveler. You have knives, persuaders, and a motorrad. In fact, you use them. That's why I want you to tell me..., uhm, these thoughts I'm having, are they wrong? If in this country, I'm the only one who have such ideas, then maybe there's something wrong with my head. I want to know the truth. I feel that, if it comes from a traveler, I'd definitely find the answer to my question."

Kino was earnest all the while, never once shifting her gaze from the serious face of the inspector. She thought for a while.

And then,

"I'll give you an honest answer. The answer to your question is, 'Yes'. ——There must be something wrong with your head," Kino said. The inspector's eyes opened wide in surprise,

"Ah.... No, but..." and was tongue-tied.

Kino continued.

"The people of this country firmly believe in the importance of living safely, and made a variety of wonderful laws for that purpose."

"Eh? But..."

"Thanks to that everyone can live safely. And happily. Do you think the people of this country are suffering and grieving in inconvenience and misfortune?"

"....."

"I also want to live safely if I can. That's why I think this country is a very wonderful place. And, if you think a country is wrong for wanting to be safe, then, there is definitely something wrong with you. It's a good thing you haven't said that to anybody else yet."

"..... I-is that so?"

"Yes. That's why you have to be more confident of your country's ways, and live in this country with pride, " Kino declared. He looked at her.

“Is that so...” The inspector muttered, dropping his shoulders.

“We’ll be going then.”

Kino started Hermes’ engine. The engine’s roar bounced off the walls.

“Ah, thank you.... Please take care...,” the inspector said.

“‘*You* take care’,” [14] Kino said. She faced forward, strapped her goggles on, and launched Hermes off.

“....Is that so.”

The inspector was staring blankly at the running motorrad.

“It’s been a long time. I feel so good,” Kino said while riding.

Kino and Hermes were riding at a considerable speed along the lakeside road. To the right was the flowing forest, and to the left was the sun, which was reflected radiantly on the surface of the lake up to the horizon.

“I agree. As I thought, a motorrad running using its own engine is much better. Being carried by the tires of another vehicle somehow felt wrong.” Hermes said happily as well. Kino purposely let the rear wheel slide when they reached a curve, and small stones came flying out of the road.

“Hey, Kino,” Hermes asked.

“Hmm?”

“That inspector’s way of thinking was exactly the same as Master’s teachings, wasn't it?”

Kino’s expression softened underneath the goggles.

“That’s right. It felt so nostalgic, listening to him.”

“I knew it. So it was on purpose. But why?”

To Hermes’ question,

“For his safety,” Kino answered. “If they can get rid of dangerous things, what more of a dangerous person?”

“Yup. In each person, there’s always that instinct to live safely.”

Kino stepped on the brakes, and let Hermes’ speed drop.

“Maybe.”

They avoided a large stone lying in the middle of the road.

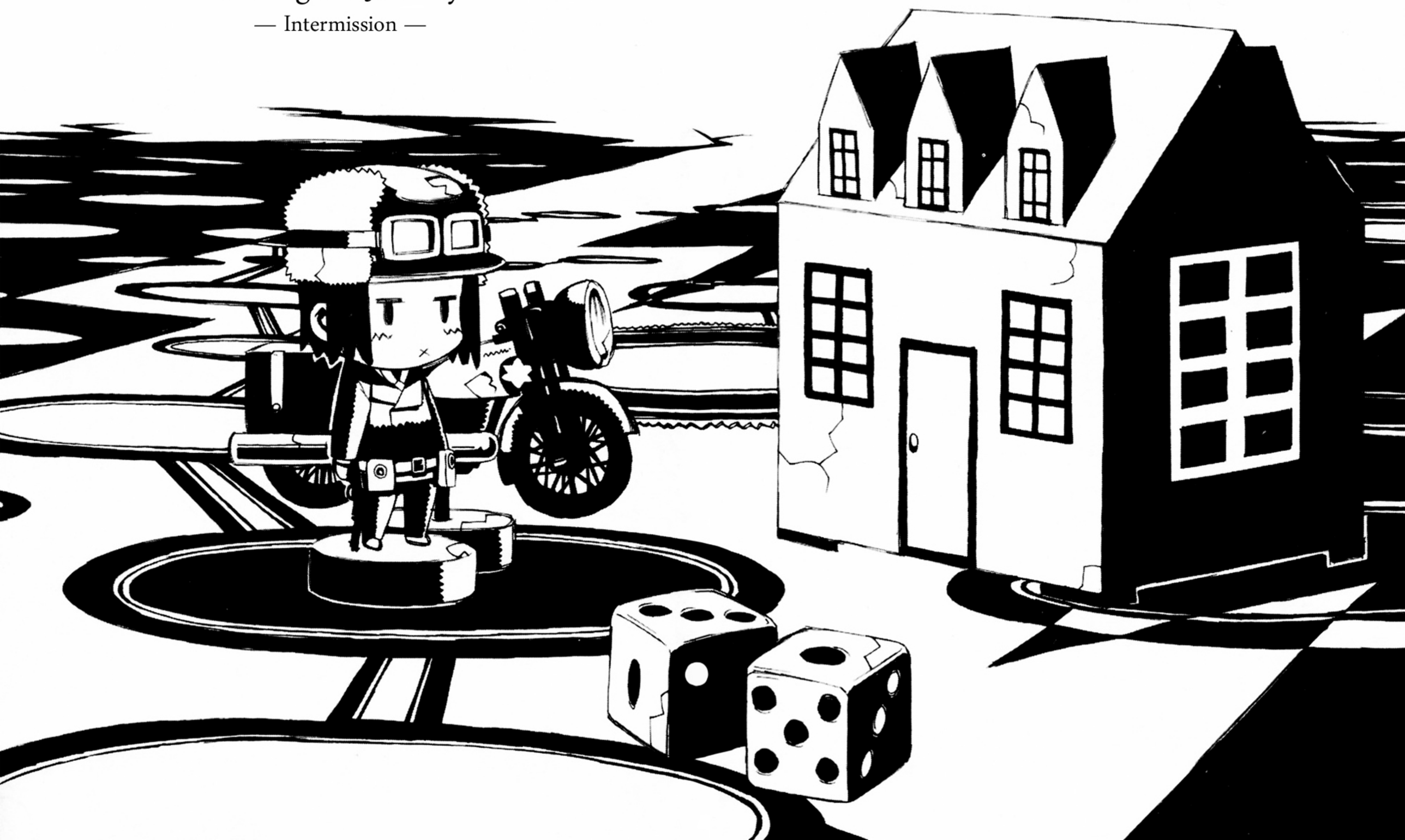
And accelerated.

“During the Journey” —Intermission— [15]

Chapter Seven

"During the Journey"

— Intermission —



There was a forest.

The dense forest was spread over a flat land. Tall trees with narrow leaves, wide trees that shed their leaves during winter, and a various jumble of green things were mixed together in the forest. A thin layer of moss grew on the ground which was barely exposed to sunlight.

Inside the forest, there was an almost perfectly straight road. All over the bumpy road's surface were traces of accumulated water. Occasionally, the roots of thick trees run across the ground, disturbing its flatness.

—

'What a bad road,' remarked a running motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly). There were boxes on both sides of its rear wheel, with a big bag, a sleeping bag, and a coat on top. The motorrad was heavily loaded with traveling luggage.

'But still, this is a shortcut,' said the motorrad's driver. She was a young person in her midteens, wearing a black jacket, a hat, and goggles. The front of her jacket as well as the wide belt for it was wide open to let in the early summer wind. She was wearing a white shirt underneath .

On the driver's right thigh was a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) holster, containing a high-caliber revolver. On her back was another one – a small automatic type.

The motorrad was running through the forest road without using up much speed, avoiding and clearing the scattered obstacles. The surrounding trees reluctantly opened up a relatively straight road right ahead.

A strong wind blew, and the forest trembled. The leaves danced, fell on the motorrad's tank and the driver' s head one by one, and once again were blown away by the wind.

The driver looked up at the sky through the branches of the trees; swarms of small grey clouds were being carried away by the wind.

‘The wind has become stronger, maybe it’s going to rain,' said the motorrad, and the driver replied, ‘I hate getting wet.' The driver added, ‘If we find a large tree, let's stop. I should probably collect some firewood,’ and dropped the speed of the motorrad.

Once again the wind noisily blew through the forest. The motorrad said in a surprised tone, ‘Wait a minute Kino, there’s a building,’ and the driver called Kino stepped on the brakes.

‘A building? Is it a house, Hermes?’ Kino asked the motorrad. The motorrad called Hermes replied, ‘If I had to day, then I'd probably say it's a school or a town hall.'

Kino looked left and right, but could only see the forest. ‘Where is it?’ she asked. Hermes said, ‘From here, enter a bit to the right side of the forest,’ and added, ‘The land is flat so I'll be able to run’.

‘Could there be someone living there?’ Kino asked. ‘ None at all, definitely,’ answered Hermes.

Kino chose a flat surface, and entered the forest with Hermes.

—

The building was inside the woods. It was hidden by the shadows created by the trees.

The building was made of stone and bricks. It was wide, has two storeys, and looked like a small school. The large square foundation stone was constructed symmetrically. At its center was the wide entrance, the fallen doors decayed below. Above it, there was a protrusion which may have served as a clock tower. It was lined left and right with two or three spacious rooms .

The building was in tatters. The sloping roof which might have been originally of a red color has almost completely faded and was spotted with the brown and black of fallen dead leaves. A dense layer of ivy has crawled over the dirty cream-colored walls. All of the glass windows were gone, leaving gaping square holes.

Thick and tall trees beside the building were competing in enclosing the building. It's as if they did not want to let it escape. Some of the roots have dug into the foundation which has begun to break.

Kino and Hermes were in front of the building.

‘Another splendidly battered building, eh,’ said Hermes. Kino got off Hermes and carefully put down the stand.

‘Is there something inside?’ Kino asked, and Hermes answered, ‘Some lizards, and a lot of bugs.'

In the strong wind, Kino entered the dark mouth of the wide-open entrance. After a while, she went out.

Hermes asked how it looked inside, and Kino said that the floor was still tiled and intact, and there was not a single place where the roof has caved in.

‘Just right. Let's sleep here for today,’ said Kino, and ‘ We can keep out of the rain, too,’ Hermes agreed.

—

It couldn't be seen from the place where Kino and Hermes were right now, but much deeper in the forest, there were hundreds and thousands of buildings lined up at regular intervals — all of them were collapsed and completely wrecked by the trees.

—

Kino started Hermes’ engine and passed through the entrance. She turned on the headlight, and a white light shined through the dark hallway. The place was muffled with the damp and stagnant air, along with a smell similar to that of the forest’s soil.

The hallway extended on both sides. They turned to the right and slowly rode while the hum of the engine resounded in the dark hallway. The wall has blackened

and the wallpaper has peeled in several places. Light shining through a small, shattered wardrobe created a shadow.

Kino rode Hermes into a room. It was located in the right corner of the building. There was nothing inside the room, which might have been originally a classroom. A weak wind entered through the frameless windows, and the leaves on the tiled floor shook.

Kino stopped Hermes near the entrance and cut off his engine. The echoing roar of the engine stopped, and a suffocating silence drifted in the room.

Kino stood Hermes on his center stand, producing a metallic noise.

And then,

“I’ll borrow this place,” Kino said to no one in particular. [16]

—

Blue people watched Kino and Hermes.

They were like thin, obscure, blue light or fog, but with the form and size of humans. Also, they had no noses or mouths, only two eyes, located where they're supposed to be. The eyes were staring at Kino.

There were about ten people in the room. There were tall ones, and short, child-like ones as well. They surrounded and continued to stare at Kino and Hermes.

'Well, you have to clean first,' said Hermes. 'Yup,' Kino agreed. Kino examined the dirt of the floor by scratching it with her foot. She went to the center of the room, and the blue people who were there glided soundlessly away from her.

'I need to brush away the leaves. I'll go get a branch to use as a broom. Wait a minute.'

As Kino said this, she placed her hat and goggles on Hermes and went out of the room.

The blue people stood, closely packed together, along the dark hallway. They gazed in unison at Kino as she went out. Kino found that the door at the end of the

hallway was gone, and headed for another exit. The blue people made way for Kino, and soundlessly followed the passing Kino from behind.

The blue people stayed behind the exit, and stared at Kino as she went out of the building.

Kino broke off a branch with leaves, and returned carrying it with her left hand.

Upon returning to the room, 'Now let's start cleaning,' said Kino, and began to sweep the leaves from the floor with the branch. The blue people continued to stare, and drew away as if not to interfere with the cleaning.

Kino gathered the leaves and placed the branch on top so the leaves would not scatter. The tiled floor was somewhat cleaner than before. She stretched the tarp she usually used against the rain with the rope, removed the boxes from Hermes' rear wheel and laid them down. Then she laid the luggage in a corner of the room away from the window, and chose where she would sleep. There she put the sleeping bag and the big bag. The blue people continued to stare at Kino.

'I'm done. This is much better than camping out,' Kino said. Hermes agreed.

'Now, only gathering firewood is left,' Kino said. She took out a cloth bag from one of the boxes, held it in her left hand, and went out to the forest once more.

When Kino returned to the room, the blue people gazed at her all at once. Inside the bag were plenty of dry leaves and branches. Kino removed her waist belt, and took off her jacket.

'That was close,' said Hermes, and Kino nodded. At about the same time, rain trickled down from the sky, now thick with clouds. Soon the drizzle turned to rainfall . Among the blue people staring at Kino and Hermes, some looked outside through the window.

The rain was quiet at first, and then noisily and continuously fell, dampening the forest and the building. From the window, splashing water droplets shimmered as they jumped into the room.

On top of the tiles at the center of the room, Kino placed the dried leaves and thin branches, and placed the thick branches on top. The blue people gazed at Kino's skill.

Kino took out a matchbox from one of her belt pouches , and took just one waterproof match. She carefully rubbed the match, waited until it was burning, and then transferred the flame. The leaves, then the thin branches burned, and eventually the fire settled down.

A small bonfire was born in the center of the room. The white smoke drifted towards the window, lingered a bit, and was soon quietly drawn out.

From the box, Kino took out two pieces of thin, long-legged, U-shaped iron bars, and joined them together. Then she placed the tripod on top of the bonfire . On top, she placed a dull, silver-colored cup, and filled it with water from her canteen.

Kino sat down at the edge of the tarp, facing the fire. She sat with her legs in front of her.

‘It’s a bit early, but I'll have my meal.' As Kino said this , she took out her portable rations from the bag behind her. The food was long, rectangular, and clay-like, and was wrapped in paper. Then she put it back Without opening it. ‘I’ll have this for today,’ she said and took out a tin of canned food instead.

The canned food was big and thin. A cow was drawn on its peeling paper label.

Kino took out a camper knife from one of her pouches, and pulled out the can-opener. She opened the can and opened the lid without clipping it off. The blue people peeped at the contents of the can from behind Kino. Inside was thinly sliced meat cooked with several pieces of garlic.

The water in the cup became hot and soon came to a boil. Kino took the cup with her thickly-gloved right hand, and replaced it immediately with the tin of canned food. She adjusted the burning branches so that the fire wouldn’t be too strong; just hot enough to warm the meat.

From the box on Hermes’s rear wheel, Kino took out a lunchbox-like rectangular can. She slowly opened the tightly sealed lid and placed it on top of the tarp. The inside of the can was divided in two. One half contained tightly packed tea paper packs, and the remaining half contained crumbling sugar cubes.

She squeezed out one tea pack with her left hand and put it in the hot water. Soon the water was stained with the tea's color. And then, she dropped one sugar cube.

Outside the window, the rain continued to fall, making quiet sounds like that of a cloth ripping apart. The outline of the trees in the forest became blurry with the thin sprays of water.

‘It’s a good thing we are under a roof.’ Kino agreed with Hermes’ words. While the blue people surrounded and stared at them, Kino slowly sipped her tea.

When the meat was ready and simmering, Kino adjusted the fire a bit more. After a few sips of tea, she said, ‘It’s mealtime.' She then put on her glove with her left hand, grasped the lid of the tin, and lifted it from the tripod.

Kino took out a small foldable spoon from one of her pouches. She pierced the meat with the slightly cracked tip. The blue people stared as Kino carried the meat to her mouth——, and exclaimed, ‘Ho—t!’

‘I knew it,’ Hermes said.

—

In the room where Hermes was parked, Kino was sitting on top of the tarp, leisurely drinking her second cup of tea.

An empty can was lying beside the small flame of the bonfire. The rain continued to fall outside the windows.

The blue people were still in the room. The shadow or fog-like blue people were staring at Kino and Hermes, who were happily talking about their plans for the next day.

—

It was still raining when the night fell and the forest became dark.

From the holster of her unfastened belt, Kino took out her .44 caliber revolver she called 'Canon'. When the blue people saw the shiny black persuader appear, they trembled and their eyes opened wide.

Kino raised the hammer with her thumb. It clicked, and the blue people trembled at the same time. Each time Kino checked if the parts were still functioning, it produced a clicking sound, which instantly made the blue people tremble for a while.

Still holding Canon, Kino untied the rolled sleeping bag. She opened the zipper on its side and spread it over the tarp. The blue people moved away soundlessly.

Kino set aside her sleeping place against the wall, and then approached the faintly flickering flame of the bonfire. She broke and spread the burning branches, and soon the flame disappeared.

The room was finally dark. The square, gray color of the scenery outside the window seemed like a paper cut-out floating amidst the dark.

Kino moved on top of the sleeping bag. She lied down, left her boots outside, and put herself inside the sleeping bag. The rolled hood served as her pillow. Only Canon

which she held in her right hand was sticking out of the sleeping bag.

'Isn't it cold?' asked Hermes. 'With this rain, I don't think the temperature could get any lower,' Kino said while lying down.

'See you tomorrow then,' Kino said. She closed her eyes and soon fell asleep.

The blue people, still blue even in the dark, stood inside the room, staring at Kino and Hermes.

—

The rain stopped in the middle of the night, and the clouds were pushed away by the wind.

Before long, the bright, glimmering stars appeared on the surface above the forest.

And nobody was there to see it.

—

Dawn came to the forest, and color returned to the damp atmosphere.

Inside the sleeping bag, Kino opened her eyes.

The thin blue morning light entered the room from the window. Nothing changed in the scenery during the previous night.

While the blue people looked on, Kino stood up and stretched her body, still holding Canon. She put on her jacket and fastened the belt.

She walked towards the window, and the blue people standing there moved away. Outside the window, the morning mist has spread beyond, concealed by the trees. The chirping of birds could be heard.

Kino went out of the building. She stopped in front of the room where they slept, and performed light warm-up exercises on the muddy ground. Then with a magazine

still attached to Canon, she practiced her quick draw. The blue people watched everything from the window — Kino drawing her persuader repeatedly.

Kino returned to the room and sat on top of the tarp.

The sky and the room were bright. While the blue people observed, Kino disassembled, cleaned, and reassembled Canon. Kino also performed a light tune-up on the one behind her waist, the automatic-type persuader she called ‘Woodsman’.

On the remains of the bonfire, Kino placed branches and lit a fire. She made the same tea, but ate the portable rations this time.

'Now then,’ said Kino and began to clean up. She cooled the tripod and lightly rinsed the cup. She wiped her face with a damp cloth, and looked once at the collar of her shirt.

When she finished rolling and tying the sleeping bag on top of the bag, the sun has already risen. Its rays were passing through the gaps of the trees in the forest.

Kino literally slapped Hermes awake.

‘Ah, good morning,’ said Hermes, and Kino said, ‘The weather is good today.' Hermes said, ‘But the road must be muddy.'

Then Kino said, ‘Let's find a river at once, where we can wash and take a bath.'

When all of the luggage has been loaded, she scattered the remains of the bonfire and buried the empty tin under the dead leaves. The blue people lined up inside the room and looked at Kino once more.

‘I haven’t left anything,’ Kino said. She hung the goggles down her neck and put her hat on.

Kino went across Hermes, kicked the starter, and started the engine in one shot. The roar of the engine rebounded in the room, and escaped to the forest through the window.

The blue people stared at Kino and Hermes. Soon, Kino straddled on Hermes, and removed the weight from the stand. She went to the middle of the room and broke into a little run. The blue people drew away.

With her left foot still on, she tilted Hermes and started the accelerator. She let the rear wheel slip and

changed Hermes’ orientation abruptly. She went out the room like this, running through the corridor lined up left and right with the blue people. From the building’s central entrance, she went out towards the space surrounded by the forest trees.

Kino looked back at the building. In the windows, and by the entrance, the densely packed blue people stood and looked at Kino and Hermes.

‘Shall we go, then?’ Kino said to Hermes, and Hermes replied, ‘Let’s go.'

Kino looked up front, and then turned back one more time.

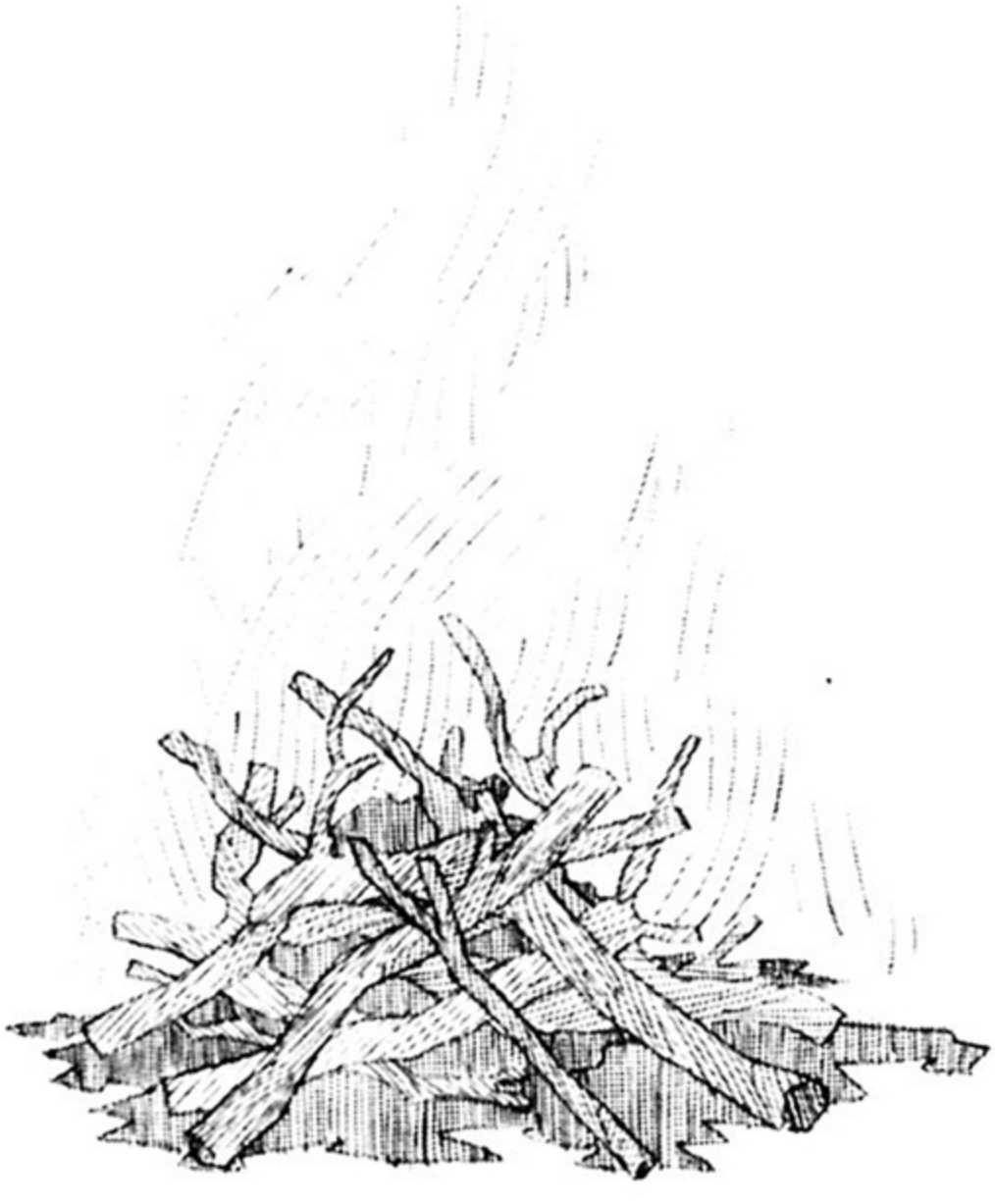
“Thank you.” [17]

Kino said softly, facing the building. Then she faced up front and launched Hermes off.

While looking at the motorrad slowly riding over the muddy road, the blue people waved their hands.

Inside the forest, there was a decaying building surrounded by trees, grass, and ivy. It was lit by the bright morning light. From all of its windows, blue people were looking out, waving their hands.

Waving their hands, forever and ever.



"For Luck" —How Much Do I Pay For?—

Chapter Eight

"For Luck"

— How Much Do I Pay For? —

My name is Riku. I'm a dog.

I have long, white, bushy fur. I always look happy and smiling, but it doesn’t mean that I am. I’m just born this way.

Shizu is my master.

—

We were riding in a buggy through a snowy plain.

Master Shizu was wearing a parka over his usual green sweater, and colored goggles. I was sitting in the passenger seat and looking forward.

The snow accumulated during the winter was somewhat melted, and it sagged when stepped on, so it wasn't scratching the body of the buggy. The flat white space covered in ashen clouds was stretching as far as the eye can see. The morning sun wasn't visible.

The buggy was running on the snow surface that was supposed to be a road. However, the engine in the back of the car was in bad condition. From time to time it wasn't spinning that well, but then it was puffing out black smoke and it seems that it would just stop.

Master Shizu was pressing the clutch and changing gears in confusion, he was using every trick he knew to prevent the engine from stopping. Then, breathing out a white fog, he said:

"It indeed needs proper maintenance."

The buggy was heading north, pushing through the thick snow with its front wheels and squeezing back the ground with chains attached to the rear wheels.

Around noon, the brown wall appeared on the horizon . A big country was emerging from the sea of white, like an island.

The country was encircled by high walls made of brown bricks. The old towers were lined up above it at surprisingly regular intervals.

Master Shizu asked for an entry permit near the grandiose gate. The guard standing there asked how long we were going to stay in the country.

Master Shizu answered frankly that he doesn't know, but the less the better.

"Until we repair the buggy. If we have any plans after that, we won't stay long."

Since our departure date was unknown, the guard offered to give us permission to stay in country for ten days tops. Master Shizu agreed.

We entered the country in our buggy which was dirty with mud.

The country we've finally came into was rich and technologically advanced.

A number of luxurious housing complexes with greenery on verandas were standing on both sides of the road with a lot of traffic. Sophistically designed streetlights and trees were lined along the streets. People in fine clothes, who seem to be quite wealthy, were curiously gazing at us from the sidewalks.

The car repair shop we were told about was located farther from the residential area, and closer to the country's center. The buggy's engine was examined there without delay.

After diagnosis, we were told that they don't know how much time it will take to make the proper repairs. The worn-out parts of the engine had to be replaced. If they had such parts at the nearby warehouse, then everything will be ready in the morning. Otherwise they had to manufacture it, so it will take two or three days. Master Shizu left the buggy in the repair shop and asked for a contact address.

He took out a big black cloth bag from the buggy and walked in the street. Near a big hotel we were told about, he said:

"It doesn't suit me. I don’t like it."

And turned his back to this gorgeous glass-sided building.

Standing at the intersection, he said that he would prefer a much cheaper place to stay, and looked over the streets.

In contrast to the tall buildings at the south side of the country that were standing in lines in an orderly way, the low-rise houses at the north side were jumbled up. Master Shizu headed north.

Soon the scenery started to change, and even for mere politeness it could not be described as pretty.

The snow was still lying on the shoulders of the narrow road, the houses were small and narrow with lots of laundry drying at the rooftops.

In the cold air, Master Shizu walked on a relatively empty street with a vacant look on his face. Then suddenly, someone asked him from behind in a forceful tone, "Where are you going?"

He turned around and saw a middle-aged police officer. He was slightly surprised when he saw Master Shizu.

"What? Are you a traveler? I wouldn't recommend you to be in such a place."

He told us that further north, the poorest people of the country were living, and one could call the place a slum. And added, "They are the lowest level in our country's class system."

"I see. They have a different social position," Master Shizu.

"So mister traveler prefers a principle of absolute equality," asked the officer.

"Yes."

"If your position is different, it's OK—— But you know what? Sometimes there are people who enter our country and then greatly protest against our class system. Well, this is cruel and we can't permit it. The roots of our principles go far into the past. And so we don't want to be taught how to live by outsiders."

"I understand. But I don't have any interest in your lifestyle. It's just that high-class places don’t fit me, so I am looking for a cheap one."

"You are weird, but do as you like—— However, those who live straight ahead are poor and filthy ones. This place is full of people who almost don't do any work, and earn their living by selling blood and internal organs and by robbing. I want to warn you that it's unsafe in there."

"Blood and internal organs, huh? ... There's no doubt they are making good money."

"Well, taking out organs from a living person is prohibited, but the clients are wealthy people so there's no control over it."

"I see. And what about artificial organs?"

"They exist, but you can't live long with them, since they're not the real thing. That's why these are highly priced. Therefore, there are people who make money and there are ones who are able to live long. Mister traveler, please try not to get robbed of your entrails."

Master Shizu thanked the officer, who then left after talking to the traveler and satisfying his curiosity.

The farther Master Shizu went, the more ruined and dirty the streets became. It was hard to believe that this area and the one to the south belonged to the same country.

When he noticed a narrow alley and realized that there were many people in there, he entered it without much agonizing.

Brown houses were standing on both sides of the pavement wet in lingering snow, causing a feeling of oppression. The plaster of the houses was peeling off, the bricks were chipped and crumbled.

The shops without eaves were visible here and there; it seemed they were almost out of business.

In front of a house, a girl was sitting doing nothing, and a man was warming by a fire made in a drum can although it was still noon. Walking along these streets, we were attracting people's attention. Children with dirty bare feet were staring at us.

Shortly, a group of young people stood before Master Shizu. Judging by their looks, they probably didn't have a job, but had too much free time and power. They blocked the way and glared at him.—— What happened next was exactly what I expected.

After Master Shizu asked for a cheap hotel without changing his facial expression, they attacked him. He beat them all into the ground. At an unsafe place, the first thing you should do is to show your strength. As a result, after that the number of unnecessary situations decreases.

Master Shizu asked the same question once again, and this time the young fellows kindly guided us to a hotel. It was located on a relatively crowded, squalid street. The hotel rented rooms on the upper floors of an eating place. The small room we were guided to had a bed and a chair, and was heated with a small electric heater.

"I like it," he said briefly to the hostess.

Master Shizu returned to the room in the evening. He said that the owner of repair shop was appalled by the hotel we stayed at.

He opened the cloth bag and took out a black sheath containing his favorite katana. He pulled it out from the sheath. There was not a single tarnish on it.

Then he put it back in the sheath.

"Please, let's have this talk one more time," I started the conversation.

"Are you really intending to go there?"

I asked the same question I asked many times before.

The answer Master Shizu gave to me was the same as always.

Then we've talked about it as we did many times already.

The result of this conversation didn't change a bit.

I took a breath and laid beside the bed, then we heard a knock at the door. I felt the presence of someone in the corridor.

Master Shizu stood up, made several steps towards the door and opened it slowly.

A young girl was standing there.

She seemed to be twelve. She had her black hair in two braids down either side of her head. She was wearing a layered purple one-piece dress typical of this country, but similar to other people around here, it was a little dirty. Her shoes were battered and full of holes.

"What do you want?" Master Shizu asked, slightly surprised.

The girl looked up and stared at him for several seconds. She was no taller than his chest. Then she showed a basket she was carrying on her back, and said in a not so loud voice:

"I am collecting scrap metal to sell. Do you have some? "

He shook his head.

"I've got an annoying dog. Do you want it?"

"Master Shizu, that's going too far," I objected from behind.

"I'm joking."

And then he said to the girl standing at the door:

"I don't have any, since we just arrived here."

"OK..."

The girl said, "Excuse me," and bowed.

Master Shizu closed the door. Through the crack in the door I saw that girl raise her head. She was looking at me . And then I noticed an unusual expression in her eyes.

Her intense piercing eyes were blazing, hiding some big determination.

These eyes didn't fit the slightly dirty face of the girl struggling against poverty and exhaustion from labor.

The next morning.

Master Shizu and I were having breakfast at the restaurant on the first floor. Master Shizu was putting the pieces of bread into his mouth, while I was sitting on the floor beside my share, waiting for him to finish. Outside, the people were coming and going, and the streets seemed crowded in its own way. The sun appeared on the sky, lighting and warming the streets.

The girl we've met yesterday barged in the dining room and noticed us.

She turned to Master Shizu who has eaten the bread and started drinking bean soup.

"Good Morning, Mr. Shizu!"

With the light from the outside shining on her back, she said this in loud cheerful voice, completely different from the one we heard yesterday. Master Shizu stopped eating and turned to her.

"My name is Rafa!" the girl introduced herself, and then continued:

"Mr. Shizu. please buy me!"

"Wha—," Master Shizu said in a voice full of surprise.

"Please buy me! If you do, then I will work for you!"

Rafa repeated this joyfully with a smile on her face.

Master Shizu stared curiously at Rafa for a while, then the girl approached us without hesitation and stood beside him.

"I don't understand what you mean," he said.

"I'll explain! If you pay me, I'll become your property, then we leave the country and will travel together. I'll become your servant and will work for you as hard as I can."

"——I don't need a servant."

Saying just this, Master Shizu hastened his breakfast. Rafa continued, ignoring his words:

"I'll tell you the reason why. I want to leave this country. In here the people of lowest class like me are very poor. I have to work, so I'm not able to go to school. I'm done with it. I'm fed up with such a life. That's why I want to get out of here. But I can't because people of the lowest class are prohibited from leaving the country on their own will. But if Mr. Shizu buys me, I will become his property and will be able to leave this place!"

"....."

Master Shizu continued his meal without saying a word.

"Please, I beg you! Please, buy me!"

"It's a good deal! I will work hard!"

"I can cook! And wash clothes! And sew!"

"And also, though it's embarrassing, since I'm a woman..., if Mr. Shizu wishes, you can lay your head in my lap and I can sing a lullaby to put you to sleep."

Master Shizu finished his meal, ignoring all of this.

He wiped his mouth and stood up. With a gesture, he showed Rafa not to follow him. Saying to a kitchen attendant that he needed to make a phone call, he borrowed the phone hanging on the wall, which seemed like it will break at any time.

I was thinking about starting my meal, but then stopped and looked at Rafa. She noticed me and squatted down.

"Hey, what can I do to persuade this man?"

I told her that I had no idea. If there was a way, then I wouldn't have a hard time either.

When Master Shizu came back, Rafa stood up. She pointed the palm of her hand at me:

"Hey, look! I was talking to this dog right now, and he approved my proposal with a smile. So?"

Saying "So?" put him in a bind.

"It's his natural face... and he wouldn't approve of this either. At least not now."

"I don't care! Take me with you! Buy me!"

The people around us were averting their eyes from the screaming Rafa and kept silent. Were they approving her actions, or just didn't want to interfere?

Master Shizu looked at me.

"Enough eating. Plus the repair——"

He glanced at Rafa. And then with an expression of something like "I can't think of anything else" and "I might regret if I say this in front of her" he said:

"——seems like it would take two more days."

—

"So! Buy me! Take me with you! Take me with you!"

Rafa climbed the stairs, chasing Master Shizu. She followed us till our room. A loud voice was echoing in the corridor.

In the end, I didn't have a chance to eat, so I came back with a bread in my mouth.

"Riku."

"Yes, Master Shizu."

"Hey, so your name is Riku. Nice to meet you—— Mr. Shizu, please!"

"I'll leave the rest up to you."

"What?"

The moment I said that, he shut the door and locked it with a key from the inside.

"Wa—!"

Rafa's voice was heard from behind:

"Hey, dog. Uhm, Riku. What should I do to please him ?"

Well.

"Don't smile, answer me!"

"I am not smiling."

Then she said, "I have a work to do. I'm sorry, but I have to go."

Before she left, she declared: "When I have free time, I'll come back and ask him to buy me once again."

Master Shizu let me into the room. After I conveyed Rafa's words, he said:

"Well, it doesn't concern me."

Master Shizu spent the rest of the day in the room.

He was sitting on a chair, staring at some point in the cold room. From time to time he would pull out his katana and look at it. He didn't do anything else. He also refused to have lunch.

I also didn't say a word. I was either sitting or lying by his side, looking at the moving shadow of the window produced by the sun.

In the evening, the room became colored in orange by the setting sun.

"It would've been better if we managed to get to that country..."

Master Shizu opened his mouth for the first time in half a day and said this in a groan.

"I'm sorry, but I believe it's a good thing that we got full car service in this country. What if our buggy broke down shortly?"

Master Shizu laughed the moment I said that. But it was not a joyful laughter, but a fierce one.

"It's simple. We would've attacked guys who come to us and would've taken their car. They probably wouldn't have any objection."

"Master Shizu——"

He interrupted me and said in a calm tone: "There's nothing to argue about."

——

"Good evening! Mr. Shizu, have you decided to buy me?"

Rafa came again during the supper. It was dark outside. In her basket, there was a little amount of scrap metal that she gathered during the day.

"Not yet," Master Shizu said shortly, without looking in her direction.

"Huh? What about tomorrow, will you buy me then?"

"Who knows."

"Well, it's alright! Whether it's tomorrow or the day after tomorrow — I am always up for sale!"

"Is that so?"

"I don't mind when it is that you buy me!"

"I see."

"But it's already late today, so I'll come back tomorrow !"

"See you then."

"Goodbye! Goodbye, Riku!"

The next day. The third day in the country.

Rafa didn't come during breakfast so Master Shizu leisurely took a meal. He contacted the repair shop and was told that the parts will come by noon, so the buggy will be ready by tomorrow morning.

"Therefore, we'll depart tomorrow morning."

I asked what we'll do until then.

"I don't have anything in mind now."

We returned to the room, and he just sat there and rested like yesterday. I don't know whether he was really doing nothing at all or was thinking about something.

Pretty soon the sky became covered with clouds, and it looked like it can start snowing any moment. Master Shizu continued to just sit there, without turning the lights on, like a retired old man in a villa.

He would've probably stayed in this position all day long, but for the girl who came at noon.

"Good afternoon! Good afternoon!"

Rafa knocked at the door with tremendous force and then opened it without waiting for reply.

She entered the room. Today she wasn't carrying that huge unbecoming basket.

Without need to ask, she explained: "I've got a permission to be absent starting from the afternoon!"

Master Shizu, still sitting, glanced at Rafa, but then just kept on ignoring her.

"So I can stay in the room from now on! Mr. Shizu, please buy me! Today! I beg you! And then take me with you when you leave the country, please!"

Though she was selling herself for quite a long time, Master Shizu kept sitting on his chair, staying calm and thinking of something else, as if he knew some technique to suppress unwanted noise from the outside.

And then there was Rafa — she was talking nonstop, and I was wondering where her stamina was coming from. I looked at both of them with shock, that soon changed to admiration.

—

Nearly one hour has passed. Master Shizu suddenly looked at Rafa.

The girl kept talking on and on:

"Since I was born poor, I wasn't able to attend school and didn't receive a proper job, so we are getting poorer and poorer."

When she said that, Master Shizu finally opened his mouth:

"... I want to ask you something."

"Alright! What is it?"

"Do you have a family?"

As Rafa heard the question, her tone became colder:

"Yes...," she answered briefly.

"What are they doing now?"

"My father doesn't have a job, so he does nothing in particular. My mother is doing the chores all day. My brothers and sisters are still very young. I'm the oldest among seven siblings."

"So you are the only one who is working?"

"Yes..."

Master Shizu raised himself from the back of the chair. Rafa, standing beside him, backed off a little.

"Answer me honestly. If you disappear, then there will be no more source of income. What will these people do? " Master Shizu looked at Rafa and asked in very kind tone.

Silence fell for some time.

Then Rafa answered with a tense expression:

"I don't know. It would be good if they manage to find a job and then work all day, without attending school, to feed the family. Just like I'm doing right now."

"I see. In other words, you prefer to live by yourself?" Master Shizu made a sarcastic remark.

Rafa looked at him. No, she returned a sharp look. And then made a small fierce nod.

"Yes—— I would've preferred to live by myself. A human should live his life by himself. I want to live my life the way I want it. That's why I'm here asking you to buy me. Besides, it might be the one and only chance I can have. That's why, that's why... I beg you to buy me..."

She closed her eyes and joined her hands on her chest, as if in prayer.

"What a horrible person," said Master Shizu. A gentle smile played on his face. I wonder, if he was really referring to another person?

He asked, "How much?"

"Eh?" Rafa opened her eyes in surprise.

"I asked how much should I pay to buy you."

—

It took some time for the extremely agitated Rafa to calm down. I didn't know if the sum of money offered to her was low or high or if it was an appropriate one.

Without much thinking, Master Shizu simply said, " Alright then."

If he paid this money at the nearest town hall, then, legally speaking, she would become his property.

When she asked for the departure date, Master Shizu informed her that it will be tomorrow at noon. In the morning we will get back the buggy and buy the things we need—— including Rafa.

Rafa said that she understood and promised that she will join us at the city gates tomorrow at noon.

"Please stay true to your word! Whatever it takes! If you won't, then I... I...!" Rafa snarled.

"I got it. I keep my promises. But please, don't take too much luggage."

"Don't worry! I won't take a thing with me!"

—

Late night.

In the room with a small lamp, Master Shizu continued to polish his katana. I was watching it.

When he finished, I told him:

"It's a good thing, for the number of traveling companions to grow, right?"

Master Shizu looked at me.

"Riku—— We will abandon that child the moment we get out of the country. Then she can do whatever she wants."

"But it means she will die soon—— She's not a dog."

"Well, then let's leave her somewhere in the next country. She could help with the chores or whatever and be able to live. She would only change the place where she lives. She can have a good life depending on her efforts and luck."

"But, the next country...," I put it mildly, and Master Shizu opened his eyes wide.

"... I forgot."

He was really surprised. Being appalled at himself, he said:

"What the hell am I saying... I..."

He shook his head. Though realizing that it's useless, I proposed:

"Master Shizu. What if we postpone our plans in order to drop the girl at some place——"

"I won't do that. In that case... of course, I'll just leave her to you."

"That's——"

"Good night."

Master Shizu turned off the lights.

—

The next morning.

The sky was overcast. Master Shizu and I went to the repair shop. We received back our buggy as well as its worn-out parts.

Then we headed to the south district, which looked like another world, to get fuel, food and water supplies.

Without saying a word, Master Shizu bought much more than usual.

Rafa was at the appointed place, but she wasn't alone. It was probably her family — young mother and father, and six little children.

She waved her hand joyfully as soon as she noticed us. Her parents and younger brothers and sisters didn't say anything, they just shed tears. They didn't say any words of favor or hate, they just kept crying while watching at us.

"Well, let's go."

Saying that, Rafa got on the passenger seat I was sitting on. She was wearing several layers of purple clothes and didn’t have any luggage. She literally came without a thing. I resigned my seat to her and moved to the place over the luggage.

"Is everything alright?"

Asked Master Shizu, and Rafa answered:

"Yeah, let's go. First, to the town hall."

He turned on the engine and we departed, leaving the crying family behind.

—

At the gate, we went through departure formalities. The guard looked at Rafa in surprise:

"Mister traveler? ... What is th-this filthy girl from the lower classes doing here?"

"I've bought her for some reason. Don't ask any further ."

After Master Shizu said that, Rafa produced the receipt .

"That's right. I'm Mr. Shizu's property. Is there any problem with the departure?"

"No...," the guard shook his head.

A little bit earlier we went to the town hall to " complete the purchase". An employee was quite amazed when he saw a huge pile of money in front of him, but he fell silent when Rafa said:

"My home address is written here. Tell my family that I’ve been sold. By all means!"

The gates started to open slowly.

—

When they finally opened, a completely white horizon appeared.

"Wow...," Rafa exclaimed.

She stood up from the passenger seat and froze.

The snow plain was stretching outside of the country. The end of winter was approaching. The layer of snow was getting thinner and soon the grass will grow from the ground and the whole land will be turned green.

Master Shizu ran the buggy outside of the gate. While he skillfully attached the chain to the wheels, Rafa kept staring at the white earth under the dark gray sky. The gate closed behind our backs.

"Don't you feel cold?" asked Master Shizu, who was wearing his parka. Rafa answered that she's already used to it, and then:

"Let's go faster! To the middle of the snowfield where the country walls can't be seen. Come on!"

"Alright."

Master Shizu raced the engine. It was running smoothly, without any black smoke.

The buggy started moving.

It happened pretty soon.

We haven't been running long. In fact, it was the time when both the shadow and the shapes of the country the girl was born in, vanished from our view.

"Stop," said Rafa.

"Huh?"

Master Shizu looked to the right, and she looked to the left.

"Please, stop the car."

He hit the brakes. We were in the middle of the snowfield. Around us was a plain horizon.

"What's wrong?"

Rafa didn't answer that question, and just stepped out of the buggy.

With a mild expression on her face, she started walking, leaving footprints on the snow.

She stopped. In the middle of the snowfield. If you were a bird in the sky, you'd see a buggy and a girl standing still at a short distance from it.

"How long are you going to stay here? Let's go."

Master Shizu spoke to her, pulling down his goggles. There was no irritation in his voice.

Rafa turned around quickly and let her braids down.

She said with a smile, "I'm going to stay here."

Master Shizu answered back with a dubious look:

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Because I'll die soon," said Rafa.

He stopped the engine and the sound faded away in the windless snowfield.

"Because I'll die soon," Rafa said once again.

—

Master Shizu got off the buggy. She waited until he came closer, then spoke to him. I heard their talk from the buggy.

"In the morning I went to the hospital and sold my internal organs. Now I have some strange machinery inside that is working as a substitute. I was told that this machine and the painkillers will last for half a day only."

"Why did you do that?"

"I wanted the money. The money I got, and the money Mr. Shizu paid at the town hall ——you've payed much much more than the market price—— were sent to my family."

"And then what?"

"It's an enormous sum of money. My family will be able to subsist on it for several years. My younger brothers and sisters will be able to go to school. There

will be no need for them to work like I did. After graduating from school, they'll be able to get a proper job . They will survive."

"....."

"And as for me, I was able to see the scenery outside of our country. I wanted to see it for a long time."

Rafa turned towards the distant horizon. Master Shizu, standing beside her, looked at the same direction. I watched them both standing side by side – tall Master Shizu and Rafa no taller than his chest.

"In other words――," he said, "I was tricked and I wasted my money."

"Yes, I'm sorry," Rafa answered, staring at the same scenery right in front of her.

"And you think you did nothing wrong?"

"Yeah, not a bit."

Master Shizu gave something like a bitter smile or a small laughter.

"Because——"

"'Because'?"

"Mr. Shizu will also die rather soon, right?"

The two continued their talk, standing side by side on the snowfield.

I was watching their backs from the top of the car hood.

"Mr. Shizu said this back then. I've heard it."

"Back then? Oh, that evening when I was talking to Riku in my room. I probably said that."

I also heard that.

"Back then you said: 'I have to do it at the cost of my own life.' When I heard this, it was the first time I've realized this method. It became clear to me that it was the only method I had left—— so I thought: 'I'll also do this way.' That's why I decided to 'fool that person'..."

"I understand..."

"I had to do this. It was the first and last opportunity that Mr. Shizu gave to me. It was the only method I could use to carve my own destiny."

Then she looked up at Master Shizu and said with a smile:

"It turned out well."

—

"'All is well that ends well,' huh?" said Master Shizu.

"What did you just say?"

"It's a proverb in the country where I was born in. If the outcome of the situation is good, then everything went well. The last thing that a person managed to accomplish in his life defines his existence—— Well, there's a different nuance, but the meaning is probably something like that."

"Even now I think it would be wonderful if Mr. Shizu wouldn't die and traveled for a long, long time. But it seems that you will perish in the next country in order to fulfill your wishes. That's why it's impossible—— You have no choice."

"Yeah, it's impossible."

"In that case it might be better to part our ways here."

"Yeah, probably."

—

"I have one last request.... My stomach has being hurting me for a while now. I hate pain. So, Mr. Shizu, would you mind——"

"Ah..., I understand," Master Shizu said, and Rafa nodded lightly with an air of satisfaction.

Then she looked at the snowfield.

There was a completely white dreary scenery.

"You know, Mr. Shizu, the world outside is quite beautiful."

"Yeah—— You can say that."

"I think, there are more beautiful, picturesque places than this, right?"

"Well, I don't know."

Rafa nodded.

"I don't know either."

—

Rafa turned to Master Shizu and he turned to her.

She suddenly reached for his cheeks with both her hands.

"I will pray that Mr. Shizu will successfully carry out whatever he ought to do."

"Yeah—— I will definitely accomplish this. I don't waver from my actions, so there's no reason to seek God's help, I guess," said Master Shizu.

"Squat down," said Rafa.

He bent his knees. She closed her eyes and kissed him lightly in the forehead.

"For luck," said Rafa with a slightly embarrassed look.

And then she pronounced the last words in her life:

"I'll wait."

"Alright," he nodded.

Master Shizu had a vast knowledge of methods that can cause a horrible death.

He also knew how to do the opposite.

—

He laid her dead body on the snow, stood on his knees beside her and closed his eyes.

I got off the buggy and approached his side, walking firmly on the snow.

When he opened his eyes, he looked at me and then at Rafa, her eyes closed.

"What a kind smile. I want to die with the same smile on my face."

Saying these words, a mild smile I've never seen before played about his face. It was exactly the same as Rafa's.

—

On the windless plain, the regular sound of a shovel digging the snow could be heard.

Soon it changed to the sound of filling up a hole.

Master Shizu returned to the buggy holding the shovel dirty with mud. I've never seen him crying. This time wasn't an exception.

He fixed the shovel at the back of the car and returned to the driver seat. He told me, standing on the snow:

"I've been overtaken. If she can do it, then I guess there's no reason for me not to be able to. If that happens, she'll laugh at me. —— Well, let's go, Riku."

He joyfully put on his goggles.

I said, "I venture to ask it one more time. Have you made up your mind?"

"There's no time for it. If we go now, we'll get there just in time. The buggy is also in good condition."

He turned on the engine.

I looked at him. Sitting on the driver seat, he faced the front and asked me:

"What should we do? Should we also part our ways here?"

"No. I'll stay with you till the end."

"I see. Let's go then."

I jumped onto the car hood and then to my usual passenger seat. I looked forward, as I always did.

Master Shizu laid his hand on my head and patted gently.

The buggy ran across the snowfield, its engine echoing smoothly.

The buggy was heading north pushing through the thick snow with its front wheels and squeezing back the ground with the chains attached to its rear wheels.

To Master Shizu's homeland. We were running towards the land of killing.

—Road to "Colosseum"

"A Pledge・a" —a Kitchen Knifea—

Diary ——Year ×× Month ×× Day ××. Sunny.

Today is the most memorable day of my life.

It is the most wonderful and greatest day of my life. Could there ever be a finer day than this?

I am so glad I can write down my feelings at the end of this day. Most of the time, only trivial things are written down in this diary. As to whether I can write down everything I am feeling right now properly, I don't know.

What I am certain of though, is that twelve years from now, I shall still remember this day. Yes, and whenever I read this entry, I shall feel the same joy I am feeling right now. And now, I shall write about the most wonderful day of my life.

Oh——, just thinking about it makes me tremble with happiness.

Oh God, I am so happy, for today, my daughter was born !

It was this evening. I received a call, and headed to the hospital immediately.

When I first laid my eyes on her, she was sleeping so peacefully in her baby tray. Oh, she is so tiny! I felt my eyes mist over.

On the bed next to her lay my dear wife, who have accomplished the most important duty in the world. She smiled when she saw my face full of tears. What a pretty smile it was. I wiped away my tears and kissed her deeply without saying a word. She has truly done her best. No, I should say we have both done very well.

Oh God! Even while writing this diary, I can't stop crying. My tears have smudged some of the ink on the page.

I have received the most precious gift in my life. In her little body flows the blood of my beloved wife and mine. No treasure could ever replace her; she is more precious and more lovely than anything in the world.

I promise —as long as I live!— I will give her all the love I have, and devote my heart and soul to make her happy.

Her happiness will be mine, and my wife's happiness.

Me and my wife will always be on her side. We will care for her always, even if it means making enemies of the whole world, even if it means sacrificing everything. We will fight for her.

I think she will grow up to be as beautiful as my wife. To think that I will see her grow and watch her life. I... I cannot put this joy into words. Is there anything in this world more wonderful than this?

When she has grown up, she will work with us. Oh God, I believe I will cry on her wedding day! Now I understand how my father-in-law felt during the wedding. I thought him such a fool, now I regret that I felt that way about him. I must apologize to him when he comes to see his granddaughter.

Our days will be wonderful together. My tiny family of two is now three. Will we live happily ever after? Will all

my past worries turn to happiness? Will everything go well, as I pray?

I have already taken a leave from work. Tomorrow I shall go to the hospital. Never mind that I will see her as often as I wish later, I still want to see my daughter! We must choose her name. We toyed with so many names for both a boy and a girl, but could never decide on one.

On my way home today, I came across some fellows, border guards from the looks of them, and overheard their conversation — a very fine name was mentioned.

They were talking about a type of bright red flower, found just beyond the borders of this country. These flowers stain the land with a bright red color, far across to the horizon. It blooms splendidly during this season, but only for a very short time.

Neither me, nor my wife have ever seen this flower before. Perhaps we will never have the chance to see it. Our daughter too.

But I still want to name my daughter after this flower. I think my wife will agree to it.

Every year, this flower will bloom all over the prairie, as if celebrating her birthday.

According to them, the name of this flower is "×××××".

And then...

"A Special End-of-Volume Quiz"

Please read Kino no Tabi VI and write its afterword.

Please follow the succeeding pointers:

- Write in Japanese. Write legibly. A title is not necessary.
- Begin it with the phrase, "In Belgium," and finish it with, "very sexy!"
- Write between 400 to 800 characters.
- Attaching illustrations is not advisable.
- Use these words at least once: "Kino", "Canon", " Shishou's left hand", "Hermes flies", "Master Shizu wow wow!", "Riku's childhood friend", "that kind of banana", "moe", "the Amur River".
- Use 'xxxxx' in place of censored words.
- Write it while doing a headstand on top of your desk.

- Use 3 for pi (3.14).

<Answer Space>

In Belgium,_____
_____very sexy!

<End of Answer Space>

- Those who finished it early should take another look at it. In particular, check for misprints, missing characters, and other mistakes.
- People who are finished will also have to answer the questions at the back.
- If you finish early, do not pressure the rest by saying 'I'm finished.' Be quiet and doodle.

Keiichi Sigsawa
Proponent

(Excerpt from entrance application exam for Year 2034 MEDIAWORKS company)

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ Included in the PS2 Visual Novel, Kino no Tabi II.
2. ↑ Note that in the original, it was not specified that the two travelers were men. But in the visual novel, the voice for the two travelers were undoubtedly male, so I supposed this is acceptable.
3. ↑ This story is the one Kino was reading during the first part of anime episode 9: The Land of Books.
4. ↑ A smoothbore is a gun with no 'rifling' or grooves etched inside the barrel, and hence, does not provide a spin to the bullet for stability.
5. ↑ Those who have seen the anime would recognize this story as the first part of episode 11, Her Journey -Love and Bullets-. As usual, the anime is toned down a bit. The ending and the 'moral' of the story are also different.
6. ↑ Not literally translated, but close in meaning to the exact Japanese expression used. It's about taking advantage of an opportunity right under your nose.
7. ↑ The title for anime episode 11, and contains the second story of that episode. Of course, this is a longer, slightly different version.
8. ↑ Kino was the one who pointed this out in the anime. It seems anime Kino understands more about romance... LOL

9. ↑ A depth charge is an anti-submarine weapon designed to damage a submarine indirectly with the shock of its explosion.
10. ↑ Surface-to-surface missiles or SSM's are guided projectiles launched from a land-based or sea-based installment towards another land-based or sea-based target. Note that if the target is an aircraft, then it becomes surface-to-*air* and if the missile was launched from an aircraft to the ground then it's *air*-to-surface. If it's unguided then it's not a missile, but a rocket. And if it goes through water then its called a torpedo.
11. ↑ A flare dispenser is a compartmentalized launcher , from which multiple flares (decoys for heat-seeking missiles) as well as armed missiles can be fired off or dispensed.
12. ↑ Another one of Hermes' babblings. He said ' bachigai ni mamono' while Kino corrected with ' kureijii ni hamono'. By the way, this is a reference to volume 1's 'Land of Adults'. This chapter has plenty of references to other stories in the book.
13. ↑ 'Sea-Monkeys' is a brand name for brine shrimp.
14. ↑ Kino says 'sochirakoso' instead of the more common 'kochirakoso'. The latter means something to the effect of 'my pleasure', 'same here', 'me too', which is basically a polite way of returning a

greeting back. However, Kino's 'take care' is no mere greeting.

15. ↑ Haven't seen it yet, but this chapter is supposed to be in the first Kino no Tabi PS2 visual novel.
16. ↑ This is the first of the only two dialogues (enclosed in double quotation marks) in the whole chapter. If you've noticed all the previous conversation between Kino and Hermes, as well as the succeeding ones, are in narration. You'll understand why *soon*...
17. ↑ Because of this, I think that the dialogues in this chapter were reserved for instances when Kino was actually communicating with the blue people. I'm quite sure Kino was aware that they were there. I know it's not a ghost story, but when I realized what I was translating, the hair on my arms stood on end.